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MOTOR STORIES

THRILLING
ADVENTURE

MOTOR
FICTION

NO. 2

MAR. 6, 1909.

FIVE

CENTS

MOTOR MATT'S
DARING

OR TRUE TO
HIS FRIENDS

By—STANLEY R. MATTHEWS.

STREET & SMITH,
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MOTOR STORIES THRILLING ADVENTURE MOTOR FICTION

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By the author of "MOTOR MATT."

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AMONG THE ALLIGATORS

CHARACTERS THAT APPEAR IN THIS STORY.

Matt King, concerning whom there has always been a mystery—a lad of splendid athletic abilities, and never-failing nerve, who has won for himself, among the boys of the Western town, the popular name of "Mile-a-minute Matt."

Chub McReady, sometimes called plain "Reddy," for short, on account of his fiery "thatch"—a chum of Matt, with a streak of genius for inventing things that often land the bold experimenter in trouble.

Welcome Perkins, a one-legged wanderer who lives with Chub and his sister while their father prospects for gold—Welcome is really a man of peace, yet he delights to imagine himself a "terror," and is forever boasting about being a "reformed road-agent."

Dirk Hawley, a sporting man who usually gets whatever he goes after; and being both rich and unscrupulous is reckoned a dangerous character to have for an enemy.

Dace Perry, a school companion of young King, who has learned to hate Matt so furiously that he is ready to go to almost any length in order to do our hero an injury.

Tom Clipperton, known generally as "Clip," a quarter-blood, who is very sensitive about his Indian ancestry.

Susie McReady, the small sister of Chub.

Edith Hawley, the gambler's daughter.

Mr. McReady, a prospector.

Delray, a watchman in charge of the abandoned "Bluebell" Mine.

Jacks,
Bisbee, } two ruffians in the employ of Hawley.

Pedro Morales, a Mexican wood-hauler.

CHAPTER I.

THE RUNAWAY MOTOR-CYCLE.

"Shade o' Gallopin' Dick! Say, allow me to rise an' explain that I kin ride anythin' from a hoss to a streak o' greased lightnin'. I don't take no back seat fer anythin' on hoofs, 'r wheels, 'r wings. If ye think ye kin make Eagle-eye Perkins, ex-Pirate o' the Plains, take to the cliffs an' the cactus jest by flashin' a little ole benzine push-cart onto him an' darin' him to git straddle, ye're goin' to be fooled a-plenty. Shucks! Here, hold my hat."

"You don't have to shed your hat, Perk."

"Got to cl'ar decks fer action. When a man with a wooden leg goes gallivantin' around on a two-wheeled buzz-wagon, the less plunder he keeps aboard the better. Hold the hat an' hesh up about it. Which crank d'ye turn to make 'er start?"

Ed Penny, on his one-cylinder motor-cycle, had come *chug-chugging* across the bridge over the town canal and stopped in front of the McReady home. While he was out in front, talking with Chub McReady, Welcome Perkins, the self-called reformed road-agent, had stumped out of the house and walked around the hitching-post against which Penny had leaned the machine. Welcome had snorted contemptuously. Penny had then whirled on the old man and had asked him if he thought he could ride the motor-cycle. This led to Welcome's outburst and the jerking off of his sombrero, which he handed to Chub.

Both boys were enchanted with the prospect ahead of them. There was never anything Welcome hadn't done or couldn't do—to hear him tell about it—and this looked like a good chance to take some of the conceit out of him.

"Ever ride a bike, Welcome?" asked Penny, his enthusiasm palling a little as he thought of what might happen to his machine.

"Ride a bike!" exploded Welcome; "*me!* Why, I was raised on 'em. Never was scart of a reg'lar bike yet, so I reckon two wheels an' a couple o' quarts o' gasoline ain't goin' to make me side-step none. How d'ye start 'er, I ask ye? What knob d'ye pull?"

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Penny showed him how to start the gasoline and to switch on the spark. Welcome puffed himself up and patted his chest.

"Nothin' to it," he rumbled. "Watch my smoke, will ye, an' see how easy ridin' a contraption like that comes to a feller that's knowed how to do things his hull life."

He pulled off his coat and gave it to Chub to hold, along with his hat. Then he rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"Snakes alive!" he muttered, with a sudden thought. "How am I goin' to keep that wooden pin on the pedal?"

"We'll tie it there, Perk," answered Chub promptly. "Wait a minute."

He hung the coat and hat on the hitching-post and started off into the yard. While he was gone, Welcome began pulling up the strap that secured the pin to his stump of a leg. By way of showing how calm and self-possessed he was, he sang as he worked.

"I oncet knowed a gal in the year o' '83,
A han'some young thing by the name o' Em-eye-lee;

I never could persuade her for to leave me be,
An' she went an' she took an' she married me."

When Chub got back with a piece of rope, Welcome was astride the saddle, his foot on the ground, with Penny, who was shaking with suppressed joy, helping to hold up the machine.

"Tie 'er tight, son," said Welcome.

"Don't you fret any about that, Perk," answered Chub, with a wink at Penny as he lifted himself erect. "Remember how to start?"

"Think I'm an ijut?" demanded Welcome indignantly. "I got a head fer machinery, anyways, an' I could hev studied it out all by myself if ye'd given me time. Are we all ready?"

Chub helped Penny pull the machine upright.

"All ready!" they answered, in one voice, with sly grins at each other behind the old man's back.

"Then see me tear loose."

Welcome worked the requisite levers, the machine began to sputter, and the boys gave it a shove. There was a good deal of wobbling, at first, but as the machine gathered headway it got steadier, and Welcome dwindled away down the road.

"Not so much of a joke, after all, Penny," observed Chub, in gloomy disappointment. "The old freak seems to know how to stay on and keep right side up. I thought he'd scatter himself all over the road right at the start."

"One on us, Chub," returned Penny. "Ah," he added, his eyes on Welcome, "he's turning 'round in that big open space near the canal bridge. Gee-whiz! but that was a short turn. Watch him, will you! He's comin' this way like the cannon-ball limited."

"What's he yellin' about?" queried Chub excitedly. "Something must have gone wrong."

Both boys watched the approaching Welcome with growing wonder. He was coming like a house afire, his long hair blowing out behind him, and he was howling like a Comanche. There was a look of helpless consternation on his face.

"Gosh-all-Friday! How d'ye stop 'er? Ye didn't tell me how ter stop 'er!"

Welcome shot past them like a bullet out of a gun, his voice trailing out behind him and becoming all jumbled up in the distance.

"He can stay on, all right," whooped Chub, "but he can't stop! Why didn't you tell him how to stop, Penny?"

"He never asked me!" answered Penny.

"The thing is runnin' away with him!"

Welcome described another hair-raising turn at another place that allowed him to circle, and came whooping back.

"What'm I goin' to do?" he howled; "how long've I got to keep this thing up?"

"Jump off!" suggested Chub.

"Can't! Ye tied me on! Wow!"

By that time Welcome was out of talking distance again. When he circled back on the next frantic round, it was plain that his gorge was beginning to rise.

"I'll skelp somebody fer this!" he roared. "Ye framed it up between ye, that's what ye done! Dad-bing the pizen ole thing-um-bob!"

Welcome was now tearing toward the bridge over the canal. A man was coming across the bridge on foot.

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Chub, staring toward the bridge, "that's Dirk Hawley, the gambler, comin' this way?"

"Welcome ain't makin' any move to turn around," answered Penny. "Looks to me as though he was going to knock Hawley into the canal."

By a common impulse the boys started on a run toward the scene of threatened disaster. Hawley had come to a standstill in the middle of the bridge.

"Slow down, you old catamaran!" he cried. "What d'ye mean by scorchin' like that?"

"Head me off!" begged Welcome. "Can't stop—don't know how to stop! Trip me up 'r somethin'!"

By the time Hawley had got this through his head Welcome was upon him. With a shout of anger, Hawley hurled himself to one side. He escaped being struck, and missed going into the water of the canal by a scant margin; but he had been obliged to throw himself flat down on the bridge, and in doing so he had jarred his body a little and jolted his temper a good deal.

As he picked himself up he said a good many unkind things about Welcome, but the old fellow was plunging on beyond the bridge and had other troubles that took up his attention.

Just as he had about made up his mind to run into the side of a building, or a fence, and bring himself to a halt at any cost, his frenzied eyes caught sight of another motor-cycle, sailing toward him. A thrill of hope darted through his breast.

"Matt!" he yelled. "Stop me! The blamed thing's got the bit in its teeth an' I can't do nothin' with it!"

Matt King slowed down, stared a moment at the frantic old man, laughed a little, then described a half-circle, put on more power, and raced along beside the runaway machine. It took him but a moment to lean over and shut off the engine.

"How did you happen to get in a fix like this, Welcome?" he asked, when both machines were at a halt and the old man was standing on one foot and trying to jerk his wooden leg loose from the pedal.

"Can't ye guess what onnery limb put this up on me?" glared Welcome. "Not sence I reformed hev I ever felt like p'intin' fer All Outdoors an' becomin' a hootin', tootin' border ruffian, as I do this here minit! Wow! The ole sperrit is a-bubblin' an' a-stirrin' around in me like all-possessed, an' I don't reckon I kin hang out agin' it."

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"Buck up, Welcome," said Matt, who knew the old fellow's eccentricities as well as any one, and understood just how much of a false alarm he was. "It won't do for you to backslide now, after you've lived a respectable life for so long. Here, I'll get the lashing off that wooden leg of yours."

Leaning his motor-cycle against a tree by the roadside, Matt bent down and got busy with the rope. As soon as Welcome could jerk the pin loose, he whirled and stumped furiously back in the direction of Chub and Penny. Matt grinned a little as he looked after him.

"I never saw the old chap stirred up as bad as he is now," he muttered. "I wonder what Dirk Hawley is doing over in this direction? Welcome came within one of knocking him into the canal. If *that* had happened there'd sure have been fireworks."

After leaning Penny's machine against the tree, Matt mounted his own and started for the bridge. As he crossed the bridge he saw something white lying on the planks, and halted to pick the object up. It proved to be an old envelope with an enclosure of some sort, and was addressed to James McReady, Phoenix, A. T. This address was in ink, but the "James McReady" had been scratched out and the name of "Mark McReady" penciled above it.

James McReady was a prospector, and was in the hills looking for gold most of the time. He was Mark's father, and Mark's nickname was "Chub." Evidently this letter was intended for Chub, and had fallen from Dirk Hawley's pocket when he threw himself out of the way of Welcome and the charging motor-cycle. But how was it that such a letter happened to be in the possession of Hawley, the gambler? While Matt was puzzling over that phase of the question, a heavy step sounded on the bridge, and a gruff, commanding voice called out:

"What are you doin' with that letter? Hand it over here; it belongs to me!"

CHAPTER II.

UNDERHAND WORK.

That was not the first time Matt King had met Dirk Hawley. The man was highly successful in his nefarious profession, owned a gambling-house in Phoenix, and Matt knew, from personal observation, that he was both tricky and unscrupulous. During the recent Phoenix-Prescott athletic meet Hawley had tried to bribe Matt to withdraw from the bicycle-race, and had even gone so far as to have him abducted from Phoenix, in order to keep him out of it. The gambler, in conjunction with an enemy of Matt's named Dace Perry, had "plunged" heavily on the Prescott contestant, and only Matt's timely arrival at the track had saved the day for Phoenix.^[A]

[A] See MOTOR MATT WEEKLY No. 1 for an account of Matt's exciting dash of twenty miles from the hills into Phoenix, and his arrival at the track in time to race with O'Day, the Prescott champion, and win the prize in the bicycle contest—a seven-horse-power motor-cycle. The story was entitled "Motor Matt; or, The King of the Wheel."

Because of all this, there was little love lost between Hawley and Matt. The gambler's face, as he stood on the bridge with one hand outstretched, was full of anger and determination. Matt eyed him coolly. With a muttered imprecation, Hawley snatched at the letter, but Matt stepped back quickly and thrust the missive behind him.

"What d'you mean?" panted Hawley savagely.

"I mean that this letter isn't yours," replied Matt. "It's addressed to my chum, Mark McReady."

"Never you mind who it's addressed to. I say it's mine, and that's all you need to know. Give it here! This ain't the first time your trail's crossed mine, young feller, an' I'm gittin' mighty tired of havin' you butt in an' try to give me the double-cross. If you know when you're well off you'll mind your own business—if you've got any to mind. Gi'me that, an' no more foolishness!"

Hawley finished with a snap of his big, protruding lower jaw. He was a man accustomed to having his way, and from his manner it was plain that he intended to have it now. But if he was determined, so was Matt; and there was a glint in Motor Matt's gray eyes which Hawley would have done well to heed.

Chub and Penny had approached the bridge from behind the gambler, drawn to the scene by the other's loud voice and blustering manner. Matt's face was toward the boys, but Hawley had his

back to them and did not know they were so close.

As Hawley made his last fierce demand for the letter, he sprang forward, intending to take it by force if he could not get it in any other way. Matt, who was watching him warily, leaped back and jerked his motor-cycle in front of him. Hawley came into violent collision with the hundred-and-fifty-pound machine, barking a shin on one of the pedals and getting a sharp dig in the stomach with one of the handle-bars. Matt hung to the motor-cycle and kept it from going over, for he was not taking any more chances with the *Comet* than he was obliged to.

Breathless and fairly boiling with wrath, Hawley fell back.

"Confound you!" he fumed, doubling up with both hands on the pit of his stomach, "I'll make you sorry for this! If you don't give me that letter, I'll——"

"There it goes!" cried Matt, flipping the letter deftly over the gambler's head. "Catch, Chub!" he added. "That's addressed to you, but it dropped out of Hawley's pocket, here on the bridge. Take care of it."

Chub grabbed the letter out of the air.

"You bet I'll take care of it," he answered. "It was dad who scratched out his own name and wrote mine over it—I can tell his fist as far as I can see it. How in Sam Hill did Hawley happen to have this?"

The gambler turned on Chub with an angry snarl.

"I reckon it is yours," said he, with a puzzling change of tactics that Matt could not understand, "but that's no reason I should give it up to that young cub," and he turned to glare at Matt. "The letter came into my hands by accident, an' I was takin' the trouble to walk out here an' bring it to you when that old freak, Perkins, came within an ace of running me down."

"Why didn't you give it to me, then?" demanded Chub. "You had plenty of chance while Matt was racin' after Welcome an' stoppin' the other machine."

"How could I give it to you," scowled Hawley, "when it was layin' on the bridge?"

"You never made a move to take it out of your pocket," scored Chub, "an' you didn't know you'd dropped it on the bridge till you'd turned around an' saw Matt pickin' it up." [Pg 4]

"Aw, what's the use of chewin' the rag with a lot o' kids, anyhow?" snapped Hawley, whirling around and starting across the bridge toward town. As he passed Matt he gave him a hostile look. "I've got a big score to settle with you, my bantam," he said, between his teeth, "an' you can chalk it up that you're goin' to get all that's comin' before I'm done."

Matt did not reply, but returned the gambler's look steadily. Then he watched him as he limped off down the road.

"Here's a go!" exclaimed Chub, as soon as Hawley was out of ear-shot. "He never intended to give me the letter. I'd never have got it if Welcome hadn't come so near runnin' him down, an' if you hadn't seen it, Matt, an' got hold of it first. What sort of a game do you calculate he was tryin' to play?"

"What did he say to you while I was sailing after Welcome?" asked Matt.

"Why, he asked if I had heard anythin' from dad lately—wanted to know if anythin' had come by wireless from Delray at the Bluebell."

Chub was of an inventive turn, and had constructed a wireless apparatus that enabled him to communicate with the Bluebell Mine, twenty miles away in the hills. Delray, the watchman at the Bluebell, was an old telegraph-operator, and a good friend of Chub's and Matt's.

"He didn't say anything about having a letter for you?"

"Not a yip. What's he developed such a sudden an' overwhelmin' interest in dad for? Why, he wouldn't even pass the time of day with dad, even if dad was willin'—which he wouldn't be, not havin' a very high opinion of Hawley anyhow. And yet, here's Dirk Hawley, walkin' 'way out here to bat up a few questions concernin' dad. But he wasn't intendin' to give me that letter, that's a cinch."

"I'm dashed if I think he was, either," mused Matt. "He made a sudden shift, after I got the letter into your hands, Chub."

"Take it from me," chimed in Penny, "Dirk Hawley's up to some underhand work. Mebby you two can figure it out, but I've got to be goin'. Hope old Perk'll get over his mad spell, Chub," he added, with a grin.

"Susie'll smooth him down, Ed," laughed Chub, "but I guess he won't buy that gasoline push-cart of yours for me, now."

"Was Welcome thinking of doing that?" put in Matt.

"That's what he had in his mind, but after that wild ride, and the way he felt when he got through with it, I guess that little Reddy McReady will have to pass up the motor-cycle."

"Well," said Penny, starting off, "a hundred takes 'er, Chub, if the reformed road-agent changes his mind."

When Penny got over the bridge, and had headed for the place where his motor-cycle had been left, Chub and Matt went on with their talk about Dirk Hawley and the letter.

"It's the biggest mystery I ever went up against," declared Chub.

"Maybe there's a way you can clear it up," said Matt.

"How?"

"Why, by reading the letter," laughed Matt, "instead of standing there and bothering your head about it."

"Sure," returned Chub. "That's the one thing to do, and it's the one thing I hadn't thought of."

Just as he started to take the letter out of the envelope, a shrill voice reached the boys from along the road.

"Mark! Come here, Mark—and *hurry!*"

Chub and Matt shifted their gaze to the front of the house. Chub's sister Susie was standing by the gate and seemed to be considerably excited. As she called to her brother, she waved her hands frantically.

"Gee-whiskers!" exclaimed Chub, pushing the letter into his pocket. "What's to pay now?"

"Perhaps Welcome refuses to be smoothed down," suggested Matt.

"It's somethin' besides that," declared Chub.

Matt mounted the *Comet* and kept abreast of Chub as he hurried back toward the house.

"Come around to the kitchen—quick!" called Susie, retreating hurriedly through the gate as the boys came close.

Matt took his machine into the yard and leaned it against the wall. Chub had already followed Susie into the kitchen, and they were standing in one corner of the room, looking down at the wreck of Chub's wireless apparatus when Matt ran in.

"What d'ye think of that?" wailed Chub, waving his hand toward the smashed instrument.

"Who did it?" queried Matt.

"I don't know, Matt," answered Susie. "I was in the front part of the house when I heard a smash out here in the kitchen. I came as quick as I could, but there was no one here. The kitchen door was open, and I ran and looked out. I heard some one running through the bushes, but I couldn't see who it was."

It had taken Chub several weeks to get together the materials for that wireless-telegraph apparatus. Induction coils and batteries he had sent away for, but all the rest of the material he had picked up here and there, wherever he could find them. The instruments had been crude, but they served their purpose and had been the pride of Chub's heart.

As he stared at the wreck, Chub clenched his hands and his lip trembled.

"Too bad, Chub," sympathized Matt. "Have you any idea who could have done it?"

"This seems to be Dirk Hawley's day for underhand work," muttered Chub.

"But Hawley couldn't have done this—he was hiking for town when it happened. Still, it may be that he was mixed up in it. Read that letter, Chub. There's a chance that it may give us a clue to the mystery."

Chub dropped into a chair and pulled the letter out of his pocket.

CHAPTER III.

M'READY'S "STRIKE."

"Why, it's from dad!" cried Susie, looking over her brother's shoulder as he opened out a brown, greasy-looking sheet of paper.

"That's what, sis," returned Chub. "Dad scribbled this on a piece of candle-wrapper."

"How did the letter get here? Where did it come from?"

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Matt explained how the letter had been dropped by Dirk Hawley and found on the bridge. The girl's face flushed angrily.

"What business had Hawley with a letter of Mark's?" she asked.

"That's just what we're tryin' to find out, sis," replied Chub. "Matt and I are pretty much up in the air, an' if this candle-wrapper don't give us a clue I guess we'll stay up. If you'll subside for a brace of shakes, I'll read this aloud, and we'll see where it lands us."

"Go on," said the girl breathlessly. "I *do* hope there isn't anything the matter with dad."

There is always more or less peril attending the work of a prospector. Mr. McReady had been gone for several weeks on his present trip, and this letter, which had fallen thus strangely into the hands of Chub and Susie, was the very first news they had had from him since he had left home.

"It was written in the Phoenix Mountains," said Chub, examining the sheet, "five days ago. It's

hard to read, as the pencil didn't make much of a mark on the grease-spots, but I guess I can puzzle it out."

Chub read slowly, pausing from time to time to get over some difficult point in the writing. The letter was as follows:

"MY DEAR SON: I am writing this in the Phoenix Mountains, about five miles northwest of the Bluebell Mine and a quarter of a mile to the left of the old pack-trail leading from Yuma to Prescott. Above me is a peak with a 'blow-out' of white quartz in the form of a cross. You can see the peak and the cross easily from the pack-trail. At the base of the peak I have piled my monuments on a gold claim which promises big things for the McReady family—in fact, I am sure it is the 'strike' which I have been trying to make for years. The discovery is mine, but if I get it safely located you will have to help me. I have lost the blank location notices I had with me, and I can't leave the claim to come to Phoenix after any more. A prospector named Jacks—grub-staked by Hawley, of Phoenix—was spying upon me when I made the 'strike.' Jacks is a ruffian, and if I left the claim for any length of time, he would put up his own location notice and rush to Phoenix to put another on record.

"I am sending this to you by a Mexican wood-hauler named Pedro Morales. He's not the sort of messenger I'd like, but he's the only one I can find. I hope you'll get this all right. If you do, hire a horse somewhere and come out here at once with the two blank location notices. It is just as well to be careful when you come, so as not to have any trouble with Jacks. If your wireless-telegraph line is working, I may try to reach Delray at the Bluebell and have him forward a message to you confirming this letter.

"Now, Mark, the McReady fortunes are at stake, and it's up to you to make good. And, whatever you do, *hurry*. From

YOUR FATHER."

There were many comments from Matt and Susie while Chub was reading. Chub's eyes lighted with exultation as he read of his father's "strike," and the face of his sister glowed with happiness.

"What d'ye think of that, sis?" cried Chub, when he had finished with the letter. "Hurrah for dad! It won't be long, now, before the McReadys move over on Easy Street."

"Oh, it's great!" murmured the delighted girl. "Don't you think so, Matt? I just *knew* dad would strike it, one of these days."

"We'll move back East, that's what we'll do," went on Chub, tramping excitedly around the kitchen; "we'll get right back to old Connecticut, where we came from, and dad will stop his crowhopping around these Arizona hills. Hoop-a-la! I'm so tickled I can't stand still. Ever feel like you was a brass band, Matt, an' had to toot? Well, that's me, right now! Where's Perk? The Old Joke ought to be around here and help us rejoice."

"I hate to be the original and only wet blanket, Chub," put in Matt, "but you're side-stepping a whole lot of things you ought to be looking square in the face. First off, your father has got to have a couple of location notices before he can get a firm grip on that claim. That letter has been five days on the road—and when your father wrote it *he asked you to hurry*."

Chub stopped prancing around the kitchen and came to a sudden halt.

"Gee!" he gasped, with a wild look at his sister, "I was forgettin' all about that." Making a jump for the wall, he grabbed his hat off a nail. "Me for town after a couple of location blanks," he went on, "and then a hot-footed getaway into the Phoenix hills."

Matt grabbed his arm before he could get through the door.

"Easy, Chub," said Matt. "You may gain time in the end if you delay a little to talk the thing over and find out just what you're up against."

"Why," returned Chub, "dad's in the hills waiting for location notices. All I've got to do is to get 'em an' take 'em out to him."

"Sounds easy enough, I admit, but there's been underhand work already, Chub, and I'll warrant there's going to be more. It might only take a few minutes to figure this thing out as well as we can, and it will be a big help to know what's ahead of you."

"Matt's right," nodded Susie.

"As per usual," answered Chub. "What do you figure out from the letter, Matt?"

"Hawley 'grub-staked' this fellow, Jacks," went on Matt. "That gives Hawley an interest in whatever Jacks finds, don't it?"

"A half-interest," said Chub.

"Well, somehow Hawley got that letter from the Mexican wood-hauler, who was bringing it to you. Jacks, from out in the hills, may have sent Hawley a tip to be on the lookout for the Mexican, for all we know. Anyhow, Hawley got the letter. He knew at once, from reading it, that if Jacks got the claim from your father it would be a good thing for Hawley."

"Great Scott!" muttered Chub, staring at Matt with falling jaw. "The gambler's out for a big graft, all right."

"I'd believe anything of Dirk Hawley," put in Susie.

"If dad left that claim," went on Chub, "this fellow Jacks could slap up his own location notice and then ride for Phoenix with a duplicate. If he got the duplicate on record before dad got his own notice to the recorder's office, the claim would belong to Jacks and Hawley. I'll bet a dime against a chalk-mark that's what Hawley's workin' out! But what did Hawley come over here for, this morning?"

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"No trick at all to figure that out, Chub," said Matt. "Hawley asked you if you'd got any word from your father by 'wireless'—"

"That's what he did!"

"Your father said in the letter that he'd try to reach Delray and have him communicate with you. Hawley wanted to find out whether he had, and whether you had sent or taken the location blanks out to the hills. That means a whole lot to Hawley, if he's working to cheat your father out of his 'strike.'"

"And it was Hawley who had some one sneak in here and wreck the wireless machine!" cried Susie excitedly. "If the instruments were smashed he knew Chub couldn't get any word from the hills."

"What d'you think o' that!" growled Chub. "I wonder what Hawley has done already, and how long he's had that letter."

"He hasn't had it long," averred Matt. "Take it from me, Chub, he wouldn't wait long, after he got hold of the letter, to come out here and see whether your father had been flashing any messages from the Bluebell."

"Somethin' has got to be done, an' done quick!" declared Chub. "We're fightin' a man that's as full of tricks as a 'Pache Injun, an' he's not going to let the McReadys beat him out if he can help it. What's our next play, Matt? You've got a whole lot better head than I have for planning a thing like this."

Before Matt could answer, there came a rap at the front door. Susie gave a startled jump.

"Do you think that's—that's Hawley?" she whispered.

"Hawley's done at this end of the line," said Matt. "If I'm any prophet, he'll pull off the rest of his work in the hills."

Chub was already on his way to the front door, and Susie and Matt followed him from the kitchen. When Chub pulled the door open, all were surprised. Tom Clipperton, a quarter-blood Indian, a school friend of Matt's and Chub's, was standing in the doorway. Beside Clipperton was a disreputable little Mexican with gold rings in his ears.

"Howdy, Clip!" called Chub. "Come in, and bring your friend. You'll excuse me if I duck. Important business, you know."

"Wait," answered Clipperton, in his quick, disjointed fashion. "This man's a wood-hauler. Hear what he's got to say. It's got a lot to do with you."

"What's his name, Clip?" asked Matt, pressing forward.

"Pedro Morales. I've known him for a long time. Helped him out of a bad scrape, once. He's never forgot it."

There was an air of suppressed excitement about Clipperton, and a smoldering light in his black eyes. Catching Morales by the arm, he pulled him into the sitting-room.

"Pedro Morales!" exclaimed Matt, turning to Chub and Susie. "Why, he's the man your father gave the letter to. You'd better wait and hear what he has to say, Chub. We're getting at the nub of this thing in short order."

"Who told you?" demanded Clipperton, peering at Matt. "About the letter, I mean," he added.

Matt explained briefly how Hawley had dropped the letter and how he had picked it up.

"Hawley," scowled Clipperton. "Dace Perry must have given it to him."

"Perry?" returned Matt and Chub, in a breath.

"Yes, Perry," hissed Clipperton. "There's a plot. He's in it as well as Hawley. Tell 'em, Morales," Clip added, nodding to the Mexican.

CHAPTER IV.

DACE PERRY'S DUPLICITY.

Pedro Morales was not feeling very easy in his mind. That fact was plain to be seen. With bent head, and holding his ragged hat in his hand, he shuffled from one foot to the other and shot shifty glances at Matt and Chub.

"Me, I was all same good Mexicano," said he. "Clipperton, he know; he always been good friend with me."

"Stow it, Pedro," growled Clip. "Tell about the letter."

"*Si*," exclaimed Pedro. "I haul de wood from de hills, from de Phœnix Mountains, *si*. I come dat way two day ago, and some mans he geeve me de letter, and say I bring him by Phœnix and geeve him to some odder mans dat was call McReady, Mar-r-r-k McReady. *Madre mia*, me, I no *sabe* Mar-r-r-k McReady; I say I ask for him when I reach Phœnix and sell de wood yesserday. Den I come, make some question on de street, and feller say he know Mar-r-r-k McReady and take de letter to him. '*Bueno!*' I say, and geeve him it."

"It was Dace Perry he gave it to," said Clipperton. "Perry was across the street from the City Hall Plaza. I was in the Plaza. Saw Pedro talking with Perry. Was too far off to hear what they were chinning about. Didn't think much about it then. Saw Pedro this morning. He told me about getting a dollar for bringing in the letter. I wasn't long in finding out he'd given it to Perry. Some crooked work about it—I knew that."

"Perry thinks about as much of Chub as he does of me," spoke up Matt, "and when Pedro tackled him about the letter, he thought he saw a chance to do something crooked."

"He never intended to give the letter to me," put in Chub, "an' it's a dead open an' shut he read it."

"Of course he read it! When he found out what it had to say about Jacks and Hawley, why, he made a bee-line for the gambler and turned it over to him. That's the kind of a chap Perry is."

A fierce expression had crossed Clipperton's face during this talk about Perry. He felt that he had more cause to hate Perry than either Matt or Chub; and Matt was constantly fearing that Clip, who had Indian blood in his veins, would get himself into trouble by making some rash and desperate move against Perry.

"He's a two-faced schemer!" growled Clipperton. "They say he owes Hawley a lot of money. Mebby that's why he's trying to help him."

"Hang his reasons!" scowled Chub. "Perry turned the letter over to Hawley and that's enough for me to know. I'll get a hustle on and hit only the high places between here and dad's new 'strike.'" Chub started for the door. "See you again, Clip," he added; "Matt'll tell you why I've got to tear away like this."

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"Hold up a minute, Chub," called Matt.

"I've lost a good deal of time now, old chap," returned Chub, pausing at the door.

"Don't get a horse," went on Matt. "Borrow Penny's machine. You can get out there quicker with that."

"That's a prime idea!" declared Chub. "I'll get the location blanks and then go for the motor-cycle."

"When you get it, come back here, and I'll take the *Comet* and go with you."

"Why," cried Chub, "I thought you were going to point the *Comet* for Denver?"

"My friends seem to need me," said Matt quietly, "so I'll let Denver wait."

Chub ran back to grip Matt's hand and wring it warmly.

"Motor Matt's a chum worth having!" he cried enthusiastically. "With you alongside of me, and two good motor-cycles under us, we'll win out against Hawley and Perry with ground to spare. I'll be back with Penny's machine just as soon as I can get here, Matt!"

With that, Chub bolted through the door and made a rush for the road.

"What's up, Matt?" queried Clip.

Matt cast a significant look at Morales, and Clip took the Mexican by the arm, led him out on the porch, and bade him good-by. When Clip returned, Matt and Susie showed him the letter from Mr. McReady, and told him everything they knew connected with the situation, including the villainous smashing of the wireless apparatus.

"Perry broke the machine," said Clip promptly. "Hawley told him to. He watched his chance, stole into the kitchen, and caused the wreck."

"It looks that way, Clip," admitted Matt; "still, it's only a guess. We don't know for sure."

"Wish I was as sure of some other things as I am of that," answered Clip darkly. "Dace Perry's a cur."

"He got a wrong start, Clip, that's all that ails him."

"I'd like to go with you and Chub. You may need me."

"It's a cinch I'd like to have you go, Clip, but there are only two motor-cycles in town, and you couldn't keep up with us on a horse."

"Well," said Clip, after a few moments' thought, "if I can't go with you I'll stay in town and watch Perry."

"It's all right to watch him, Clip, but keep your hands off him. Hawley would like nothing better than to land you behind the bars, if he could."

Clipperton took this advice in moody silence. He and Matt walked out on the porch to wait for Chub, and, while they were sitting on the steps, Welcome Perkins turned in at the gate and came

stumping toward them along the front walk.

There was an aggrieved look on Welcome's face. He carried a stick over his shoulder, and at the end of it swung a small bundle tied up in a red bandanna handkerchief.

"What's the matter, Welcome?" asked Matt, casting a quizzical look at the old fellow.

"Blamed if I ain't stood it jest as long's I'm goin' to," answered Welcome. "That onnery limb has played tag with me 'bout long enough. I been driv out o' my home, an' I'm goin' into the hills an' git lawless. That red-headed bandicoot of a Chub has got into a habit o' playin' football with me an' usin' me fer the ball. I'm plumb tired, an' there ain't no use tryin' to be respecttable, no-how. When I'm the Terror o' the Hills, an' everybody 'most is huntin' of me, an' there's a price on my head, Chub McReady'll hev it to think about."

"Well," said Matt, with a wink at Clip, "if you've got to go, Welcome, good-by and good luck. Don't be any more lawless than you can possibly help."

Welcome looked disappointed. This was his usual "bluff" whenever things failed to go as he thought they ought to. He wanted Matt to get excited and argue with him to stay away from the hills.

"Whenever I cut loose," went on Welcome morosely, "I allers go the limit. That's my natur', an' ye can't git away from a feller's natur' anyways ye try. I'm plumb sorry fer law an' order now that I've backslid, an'—"

"Don't let us keep you, Welcome," said Matt. "I guess you're in a big hurry, and you've got a long walk before you get to the place where you can begin your depredations."

"That's right," returned Welcome. "I'd a-been gone long before now if I hadn't had to go over town arter some things I need." He pulled a can of sardines out of one pocket and looked at it moodily for a second, and then drew a can of salmon out of another pocket. "I've heern tell," he continued, "that a fish diet is pacifyin'. I jest drapped in ter say good-by to Susie. She's allers been good to me, Susie has. Jim McReady's a mighty good friend o' mine, too, an' he's trusted me to stay here an' look arter Susie an' Chub while he's prospectin'. I want ye to tell Jim, Matt, how blamed hard I tried to do my duty, but that I jest couldn't stand the brow-beatin' an' bullyraggin' I got from Chub."

At that moment Susie came out on the porch.

"Why, Welcome!" she exclaimed; "what's the matter?"

The old man gave a plaintive snuffle.

"Been driv out ag'in, gal," he answered, "an' this here's the last time. I stood enough to drive a preacher to drink, but never no more, never no more. Good-by, Susie. You've allers been good to me, you hev, but that brother o' your'n 's a case."

Welcome swung his stick over his shoulder and stepped forward to shake hands with Susie.

"Welcome Perkins," she cried, "you go right into the house and stop this foolishness!"

"Oh, let him go, Susie," said Matt. "Right now, when the McReady family have a big fight on their hands, Welcome makes up his mind he wants to leave. I didn't think it of him, but, if he's bound to go, tell him good-by and let him start."

"What's that I'm hearin'?" queried Welcome, pricking up his ears. "The McReadys got a fight on?"

"Never you mind about that, Welcome," returned Matt cheerfully. "Just hike right along. What do you care for the McReadys, anyhow? After the way you've been treated here, I should think you'd be glad to cut the whole family and dig out. Good-by!"

"You dry up!" glared Welcome. "I'm talkin' to Susie. What's this about a fight, gal?"

At that moment Chub came dashing up to the front gate on Penny's motor-cycle.

"All ready, Matt!" he sang out.

Welcome whirled around. When his eyes alighted on that motor-cycle of Penny's, unpleasant memories were revived, and he turned his back and stumped around toward the rear of the house.

"Welcome is making a good bluff of it this time, Susie," chuckled Matt, getting up and starting to get his wheel, "but he'll calm down when you tell him the business Chub and I have in hand." [Pg 8]

"You and Chub be careful, Matt," implored the girl. "Hawley is capable of doing almost anything, and he has a grudge against you both."

"And me," interpolated Clip. "But I'll watch him. And Perry, too."

Susie stood on the porch, watching anxiously while Matt trundled the *Comet* down the walk and out of the gate. Welcome, anxious to know what was going on, but in his present temper not caring to make any inquiries of Chub or Matt, stood peering around a corner of the house.

"Don't fret, sis," called Chub encouragingly. "Motor Matt is helping the McReadys, this trip, and you can bet we're goin' to win out. We'll cinch that 'strike' of dad's, and Hawley'll be so badly beaten he'll never know what struck him. So-long!"

Matt waved his hand, and the sharp explosions of the two motor-cycles merged into a steady hum as the boys vanished up the road.

Chub had no suspicion as to what sort of a hard fight lay ahead of them, or he might not have

been so sanguine of success.

CHAPTER V.

A DISAGREEABLE SURPRISE.

Penny's motor-cycle was a one-cylinder machine, and not a very late model. It weighed as much as the *Comet*, which had two cylinders and twice as much horse-power. Matt's machine, however, was the very last word in motor-cycle construction. In a pinch, it could streak along at sixty-five miles an hour, or, on the low gear, would do five just as readily. It was somewhere between these two extremes that Matt had to travel in order to let Chub keep alongside, but at no time were they doing less than a mile every two minutes.

A highway known as the Black Cañon road led to the Bluebell Mine, and by taking a cross-thoroughfare shortly after leaving the house the boys whirled into their direct course. It was about eleven o'clock when they started, and they were planning to make their first halt with Delray at the Bluebell.

"You could double the pace, Matt, if it wasn't for me," said Chub, leaning over the handle-bars and opening his machine up for all it would stand. "This thing-a-ma-jig of Penny's ain't in the same class with yours."

"Oh, well, it's not so bad for a back number," answered Matt. "We're doing our thirty miles an hour just now, and I guess that's plenty. We'll make the Bluebell easily by noon," he added, cocking his eye at the sun.

"I hope nothing has gone wrong with dad since he wrote that letter," went on Chub, after a brief silence. "He's able to take care of himself, so far as Bill Jacks is concerned, but if Hawley sends any roughs out there, something is sure goin' to happen."

"I don't believe in crossing any bridges before you get to them, Chub. We'll just push hard for the place where your father made his strike, and hope for the best."

It was half an hour after they left Phoenix when they crossed a new plank bridge over the Arizona canal, fifteen miles out.

"They weren't long getting another bridge over the canal," observed Chub, as the machines left the planks and started up a gentle slope beyond. "That was one bridge, Matt, you came pretty near not crossing, even when you got to it."

Chub referred to the time Motor Matt was racing for Phoenix to take his place in the bicycle contest. A hireling of Hawley's had blown up the bridge in front of the *Comet*, and Matt had been obliged to cross the chasm on a narrow stringer.

From the canal it was only five miles to the Bluebell Mine, and the distance was rapidly covered. As the boys drew close to the derrick, the ore-dump, and the little house where the watchman usually kept himself, they slowed down their machines and looked around expectantly. There was no sign of life about the place.

"Probably Del's in the shack, gettin' his dinner," hazarded Chub. "I guess we could take time to eat a little something ourselves before we go on to the 'strike,' eh, Matt?"

"Del's not getting dinner, Chub," answered Matt, coming to a halt and slipping out of his saddle. "There's no smoke coming out of the chimney, and that means there's no fire in the stove. I'll bet a picayune against a last year's bird's nest that Delray isn't here."

"Hang it all!" returned Chub, leaning his machine against the wall of the house, "he's the watchman, an' he's *got* to be here. We'll investigate."

They went into the house. The door had not been locked, but there was no sign of the watchman in the cabin's single room.

"He can't be far away," averred Chub, "or he wouldn't have left the door like that."

"Whether Delray's here or not, Chub, that doesn't cut much of a figure with our work," said Matt. "We know where we want to go and how to get there."

"Sure, but I'd like to see Del and ask him if dad has tried to shoot anything into Phoenix by wireless. We can lose a little time here, I guess, without spoilin' the big end of our game."

An exclamation from Matt drew Chub's instant attention.

"Great Scott, Chub, look there!"

Matt was pointing toward the table which supported the Bluebell end of the wireless apparatus. Sending and receiving-instruments had been completely wrecked, and parts of them were scattered over the floor.

"Well, what d'you think of that!" muttered Chub. "Hawley was bound dad wouldn't get any message through to me by way of the Hertzian waves. Wonder if Dace Perry did this, too?"

"Not much, Chub. These instruments, like those at your house, must have been broken some time to-day—you see, Del hasn't even had time to pick up the scrap. If Perry smashed the apparatus at the Phoenix end of the line, he'd have to be chain-lightning to get here and wreck these

instruments, too. No, it wasn't Perry."

"Think it was Jacks?"

"One guess is as good as another. I'd like to hear what Del has to say about this. Maybe he's down in the mine?"

"We'll take a look," said Chub, starting for the door.

The ore-dump and derrick were only a little way from the house, and the boys were soon climbing the dump to the platform at the mouth of the shaft. Kneeling down at the opening in the platform, they leaned over and shouted Delray's name into the pitchy darkness below. No answer was returned.

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"He couldn't hear us if he was in some of the levels or crosscuts," remarked Chub. "Del was hired to keep a sharp watch on this mine while it's lying idle, an' I don't think he'd go 'way. He *must* be down there. I'll go back to the house for a candle, and we'll take a hunt through the workings."

Chub was but a minute in getting back with a couple of candles. These were lighted, and the boys started down the rickety ladders, Matt leading the way.

The shaft was a hundred feet deep, and there were two levels opening off it—one half-way down, and the other at the bottom.

Matt and Chub got off the ladders at the first level, walked to the end of the passage, and there, by means of a winze connecting the two levels, descended to the bottom of the mine and made their way back to the shaft again. Thus they made the complete circuit of the workings—and without finding any trace of Delray. They climbed disappointedly up the shaft, after having been in the mine for about half an hour.

"This is tough luck, Matt," muttered Chub. "I wonder if there has been any foul play here? When Hawley is out for a big winning, it isn't much that he'll stop at."

"He wouldn't have the nerve to go too far with Delray," answered Chub. "Hawley is unscrupulous, all right, but he's not going to get the law down on him if he can help it."

"He might have had some of his roughs run Delray off while those wireless instruments were bein' smashed."

"No, I don't think he'd do even that. It looks to me as though some villain had stolen into the house and wrecked the instruments while Del was out—just as the job was done at your place in Phoenix."

"The farther we go in this thing the more mysterious it gets."

"And the more we see that Hawley is leaving no stone unturned to beat your father out of that mining-claim. We'd better make a quick run to the 'strike,' Chub, and see what shape matters are in there. From the looks of things this far, the prospect worries me."

"I'm some worried myself," admitted Chub, "and I'm gloomed up a heap because we can't find Delray. I know where that pack-trail is, though, and we'll hit it good and hard."

While they were talking they were stumbling down the ore-dump and making their way to the place where they had left their motor-cycles.

"There's a lot of shady characters in these parts," Chub went on, "who wouldn't pass up a ten-dollar bill if Dirk Hawley wanted any crooked work done. Hawley's friends are mainly among that class."

"Bad as he is, though," said Matt, "there are some good things about the gambler. They say he has a daughter in school in 'Frisco, and that he keeps her there so that neither she nor her friends will find out what sort of a man he is."

"That's Edith Hawley you're talkin' about, Matt. I've heard the same yarn, but if Hawley's keeping the girl in 'Frisco an' tryin' to make her and her friends think he's a saint, he's going to get fooled. The girl's here on a visit, and if she's as bright as they say, she'll find out that——"

The words died on Chub's lips. He and Matt had rounded the corner of the house, and had come to a halt facing the spot where they had left their machines.

The motor-cycles were not there!

"Stung!" gasped Chub, staring at his chum in consternation. "Am I in a trance? Didn't we leave our machines here, Matt?"

"We did," answered Matt excitedly, "and they're gone."

"Somebody must have come here an' rode 'em off while we were in the mine!" cried Chub. "More of Hawley's work, and I'll bet my hat on it. He's got us now. That's the one thing he could do that would knock us out entirely. Oh, what a pair of dubs we were!"

Chub, in despair, dropped over against the side of the house and banged at the adobe wall with his clenched fists. Matt, after a moment's thought, darted away toward the road.

"Where you goin', Matt?" cried Chub.

"To see which way the thieves went," called back Motor Matt.

"What's the use? Think we could overhaul 'em on foot? This is where Johnny Hardluck puts us down and out, an' no mistake!"

Chub, terribly cast down, continued to lean against the house and say things to himself. He watched Matt absently as he ran up and down the road, reading the signs left in the dust.

Suddenly Matt halted, turned sharply about, and called to Chub.

"We've got a fighting chance!" he yelled, peeling off his coat and casting it by the roadside. "Strip, Chub, and unlimber those short legs of yours. There's a good hard run ahead of us."

The bewildered Chub got out of his coat and dropped it where he stood, then he started in Motor Matt's direction, wandering what was in the wind. How were the two of them, on foot, ever going to catch up with the motor-cycles?

CHAPTER VI.

OVERHAULING THE THIEF.

Matt, headed in the direction of the canal and Phoenix, set the pace. It was a fast one, and Chub was blowing before they had covered a hundred yards.

"If you want me to travel with you," puffed Chub, "you'll have to be a little less hasty. What's the good, anyhow? Those motor-cycles are going a dozen feet to our one."

Matt pulled down to a dog-trot in order to explain and to give Chub a chance to get back his wind.

"You're wrong, Chub," said he. "Even at this rate, we're traveling faster than the motor-cycles, or at least as fast."

"The thieves can't be in much of a hurry to get away."

"No one is riding the motor-cycles. There are only two motor-cycle tracks leading this way, and we made 'em ourselves when we rode to the Bluebell."

"Mebby the thieves went the other way?"

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"No tracks on the other part of the road at all."

Chub dropped his eyes to the road and scanned it as he jogged along. The marks left by the pneumatic tires of the motor-cycles could be clearly seen; and on either side of them was a heavier mark.

"Put me wise to it, Matt. Has a wagon been along here since we got to the Bluebell?" gasped Chub.

"A broad-tired freight-wagon from some of the mines," added Matt. "There were four horses hitched to it and it was going to Phoenix."

"Oh, slush!" exclaimed Chub admiringly. "You've hit it off straight as a die, Matt. Why, thick-headed as I am, I can count the hoof-tracks of the horses and see which way they were headed, now that you've given me the tip. But what has the freight-wagon got to do with the machines?"

"The wagon stopped close to the house on the Bluebell," went on Matt. "I could tell that by the way the hoof-tracks were all cluttered up. And then, too, around the place where the wagon stopped there were boot-marks. It's a cinch the freighter took our machines."

"It can't be that freighter is graftin' on his own hook, Matt, an' yet I'm a Navajo if I can see how Hawley ever put it up to have him run off with the wheels. I don't believe the gambler is keepin' track of us as close as all that."

"The freighter has the two machines," averred Matt. "Why he took 'em needn't bother us very much just now; we know they're in his wagon, and that's the principal thing. It's up to us to get the motor-cycles back. A four-horse freight-wagon, even when it's empty, can't travel very fast. About all we've got to do is to outrun the gait of a walking horse. The faster we beat it, the quicker we reach the wagon."

"It looks good to me," said Chub. "Say, I would have been up in the air, wouldn't I, if you hadn't been along? But for this mix-up in the hills, you'd have been starting for Denver."

"I was going to start for Denver to-morrow," returned Matt, "but I'm not particular about a thing like that, Chub, when my friends need me."

"True to your friends always, eh?" said Chub, his blue eyes glistening. "No wonder Motor Matt makes a hit with everybody."

"And connects with a few hits himself, now and then," added Matt dryly. "How about another spurt, Chub? That wagon didn't have much the start of us, and when we get to the top of the next 'rise,' I think we ought to see it."

"Spurt away! My legs are too short for sprinting, but I'll work 'em the best I can."

Elbows close to his sides, head up and shoulders back, Matt dug out once more. Chub rambled along beside him and bounced up the slight ascent. From over the "rise," and before they reached the top of it, the boys could hear the creaking of a heavy wagon, and the hoarse voice of a driver swearing at his horses. A few moments more and they were looking breathlessly down on the freighting outfit, trekking slowly Phoenixward and not more than a hundred feet from where they

were standing.

There was one red-shirted, rough-looking man on the driver's seat—just one. The freighter had a long black-snake whip, and was snapping it about the ears of the leaders. But what appealed to the boys most was what they saw in the rear of the wagon.

From their elevated position they were able to look down into the high box of the vehicle. Evidently the freighter was going "empty" into Phoenix after supplies for some mining-camp; but there was more in the box than there had been when it started from the mine, for the two motor-cycles were there, lashed with ropes to the sides of the high box.

"There he is!" panted Chub, "and thank our stars there's only one. But if he gets hostile—and if he happens to have a gun——"

"Peaceful freighters are not carrying guns," said Matt, "and if he gets hostile—well, there are two of us."

"Sure," cackled Chub, "and if we have a set-to, Matt, you can count on me to make a noise like a prize-fighter, anyhow."

The freighter's conscience did not appear to trouble him in the least, for he was not paying the slightest attention to the trail behind him. With one foot on the brake, he was whoa-hawing his four-horse team and talking like a pirate.

Matt and Chub ran swiftly down the slope. When they were close to the wagon, Matt swerved to pass around it and get to the heads of the horses, while Chub, getting suddenly reckless, jumped up on the end of the "reach" and slammed into the end gate.

The noise Chub made drew the freighter's attention. The man turned and gave a savage yell when he saw Chub.

"Git off'n thar, you!" he whooped, and with the words his long whip leaped backward in a sinuous coil.

Snap! went the lash, like the report of a pistol, and Chub tumbled into the road, holding both hands to the side of his throat.

Matt's temper began to mount at the brutal way Chub was treated. The incident, while unpleasant for Chub, afforded Matt time to pass the man and gain the heads of the leaders of the team.

"Stop!" he shouted, grabbing the bits of the horses and pushing them back on the "wheelers."

The freighter had already clamped the brake-shoes to the wheels, so that the wagon, although on a slope, did not run down on the wheel-horses. Taking his attention from Chub, the man turned in the seat and glared at Matt.

"Git away from them hosses!" he shouted, jumping to his feet, with the whip in his hand. "Git away, I tell ye, or I'll snap out one o' yer eyes with this here whip-lash. I kin do it—don't you never think I can't."

"You'd better cool down," cautioned Matt, his gray eyes glimmering, "if you don't want to get into more trouble than you can take care of."

"I ain't goin' ter take none o' yer back-talk, nuther," whooped the man. "Le'go them bits!"

He began lifting the handle of the whip, preparatory to using the lash.

"You've got two motor-cycles in the back of your wagon," said Matt, keeping wary watch of the freighter, "and they belong to my chum and me. What business have you got taking them off?"

"Belong to you, eh? Well, I reckon not. Young Perry told me they belonged ter him an' a pard o' his, an' he tucked a dollar bill inter my hand fer takin' 'em ter town."

Matt was astonished at this piece of information.

"Where did you see Perry?" he demanded.

"I don't know as I got ter palaver with you, but I don't mind sayin' that young Perry was on a hoss clost ter the house on the Bluebell as I come by. He stopped me an' told me ter take in the machines, jest as I was tellin' ye. Now, drop them bits, or thar's goin' ter be trouble."

"Say," called Matt earnestly, "you've been fooled. Perry don't own those machines, but was——"

"Perry's a friend o' Hawley's, an' Hawley is a friend o' mine," roared the freighter, "an' I'm takin' his word agin' your'n. Git away from thar. Last call!"

Matt did not get away. A second more and the whip-lash leaped at him between the heads of the leaders. Quick as a flash he ducked to one side, and the lash snapped harmlessly in the air. Then, as the lash flickered for an instant on the neck-yoke, Matt executed another quick move. Reaching out, he caught the end of the writhing whip firmly, and gave it a jerk, in the hope of pulling it out of the freighter's hands.

What happened was more than Matt had expected.

The whip did not come away, but the freighter was toppled out of the wagon-box and took a header earthward alongside the off wheel-horse.

He gave a convulsive movement and then became quiet.

"You've killed him, Matt!" cried Chub frantically.

"Rot!" flung back Motor Matt, hurrying around to where the freighter was lying and hauling him away from the hoofs of the horses. "He's just stunned, that's all. Jump into the wagon, Chub, and untie the wheels. When you're ready, I'll help you get them into the road. Sharp's the word now, old chap. I'll watch the freighter while you're working with the machines."

Chub, chuckling to himself over the neat way fortune was coming to their aid, once more climbed into the wagon.

Matt, noticing a movement on the part of the freighter that told of returning consciousness, drew his big, ham-like hands behind him and twined the whip-lash about the wrists.

It was well Matt took this precaution, for, a moment after the tying was completed, the man's eyes opened.

"Tryin' ter kill me, was ye?" he snarled.

"Not at all," said Matt coolly. "I was trying to take the whip away from you, and you fell out of the wagon."

"All ready, Matt!" called Chub.

Matt whirled away from the freighter, to help Chub get the motor-cycles down. Hardly were the two machines on the ground, when the boys heard the freighter yell and saw him charge toward them. It had been impossible for Matt to tie his hands securely with the whip, and he had freed himself and was hustling toward the rear of the wagon, to intercept the boys and prevent them from getting away.

"Quick, Chub!" yelled Matt. "Get into the saddle and let your machine out for all it's worth. We've lost too much time as it is."

There followed a wild scramble, a half-dozen revolutions of the pedals, and then the motors began to work. The two machines glided up the slope, leaving the baffled and swearing freighter far behind.

CHAPTER VII.

BACK TO THE BLUEBELL.

"Nothin' hard about that!" gloried Chub, taking a look over his shoulder from the top of the "rise." "Mister Man had a little surprise-party sprung on him that trip. Now it's down-hill—see us scratch gravel here! You're the clear quill, Matt. The way you worked through that trick was some fine!"

"Luck," answered Motor Matt. "It's bound to come a fellow's way now and then. Tie something around the side of your throat, Chub. That whip-lash knocked off a piece of skin."

"Felt like it had knocked off my head, at first. I'll tie it up when we get back to the Bluebell."

"What's the good of stopping at the Bluebell? Dace Perry is somewhere ahead of us on a horse. You heard what the freighter said about Perry?"

"There didn't any of that get away from me, Matt. Gee! but that was somethin' of a jolt. If Perry smashed that wireless machine in Phoenix, he didn't waste any time coverin' the twenty miles between there and the Bluebell."

"He must have reached the mine while we were down in the workings, looking for Delray. He saw the two motor-cycles leaning against the wall of the house, and he didn't have to guess very hard to know who was around. The freighter came along just at the right time—for Perry."

"Funny thing to me, Matt, that Perry didn't slash the tires."

"Probably he didn't have any too much time. Besides, he might have thought we could fix the tires, while if the motor-cycles were sent on to Phoenix, we'd be a lot worse off than if we had the crippled machines."

"Hawley's mighty clever—and don't you let that get past your guard for a minute! Whenever he lays out to do a thing, he's right on the job from start to finish. What d'you suppose he's sent Dace Perry out here for?"

"The way I size it up, Hawley wants to get some word to Jacks. Perry must have been on his way to the hills when he stopped off at your place, Chub, and smashed the wireless instruments. The way we got hold of that letter on the bridge has raised trouble with Hawley's plans, and now he's rushing things for a quick finish. That means that we've got to hustle, too, if we save the 'strike' for the McReadys!"

"Well, I guess we can. You're a reg'lar whirlwind, Matt, when you start the gasoline and switch on the spark. I'm not built for rapid work, but I guess I'll do with you for pacemaker. But see here, why didn't we pass Perry on the road? He left Phoenix before we did, and got to the Bluebell behind us—and he had to come the Black Cañon road."

Matt had been thinking of that.

"It's a cinch we had to pass him, Chub," said he, "and we probably did it in the hills this side of the canal. If he saw us coming, it would be easy for him to duck out of the way among the rocks."

"That's what he did!" declared Chub. "He had some reason to expect we'd be at the Bluebell."

"And after helping load our machines into the wagon," continued Matt, "he spurred off to find Jacks and tell him we were on the way with the location notices." A grave look crossed Matt's face. "Something's going to happen at the 'strike,' and we better not stop at the Bluebell any longer than it takes to snatch up our coats."

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They were now close to the Bluebell again, and were surprised to see a man run out of the house and wave a hand in their direction.

"It's Del!" cried Chub. "He's got back from wherever he was just in time to miss the fun."

"He's making a dead set for us," added Matt, "and is bringing our coats."

"Great glory!" exclaimed the watchman, as he drew near the place where the boys had stopped, "I've been doing a pile of guessing ever since I picked up these coats. What did you leave 'em for?"

"We haven't got much time to talk, Del," answered Matt. "While we were in the mine looking for you, Dace Perry rode up on horseback, and a man in a freight-wagon happened along at the same time. Perry hired the man to carry our machines to Phoenix, and Chub and I sprinted after him and got them back. That's how we happened to leave our coats."

"Well, I'm blamed!" muttered Delray. "There's been a lot of strange doings around here. This morning, while I was off to the spring getting some water, some one sneaked into the house and smashed the wireless instruments. What's goin' on, anyhow? Why should Dace Perry try to take the motor-cycles away from you? Same old grouch, or is it something new?"

"Have you heard anythin' from dad, Del?" put in Chub anxiously.

"No. Was he expecting to drop in here?"

"I got a letter from him sayin' he might, just to send me a wireless message. He's five miles northwest of here," and Chub went on briefly to tell of his father's "strike," the impending trouble with Jacks, and what Hawley was trying to do.

"That gambler seems to be botherin' you boys a whole lot lately," remarked Delray. "If you've got those location blanks, Chub, you and Matt'd better hike right on and help your father out of his difficulty before it gets any worse. And keep your eyes open, too. You've both had experience with Hawley, and know the kind of a man he is. If I can help you any here, count on me."

"We'll pull right out, Del," answered Chub. "Where were you when we were going through the mine?"

"Taking a little *pasear* through the hills, trying to see if I could locate the scoundrel that smashed the wireless instruments. You know how to get to the old pack-trail?"

"I was over part of it with dad once."

"Then hustle—and don't forget to keep your eyes skinned. I've got a gun in the house if you'd like to borrow it."

The boys were away before the last suggestion reached them, and Matt did not think it worth while to turn back.

About a quarter of a mile north of the Bluebell, at a place where the Black Cañon road ran through a small *barranca*, the boys came to the old pack-trail. A gully cut through the walls of the *barranca* at a sharp angle, and the pack-trail followed the bottom of the depression.

"Here's where we leave the main road, Matt," announced Chub. "That old trail ain't much more than a bridle-path, an' I don't know what sort of work our machines are going to make on it, but we'll go ahead and see."

"Sure," said Matt. "If Perry could get over the pack-trail on a horse, I guess we can get over it on our wheels."

"I'll take the lead," went on Chub, turning into the gully. "I don't know such a terrible lot about the trail, Matt, but I've been over a little of it, and that's more than you have."

"All right, Chub," assented Matt, falling behind. "Keep a good watch ahead. If you see Jacks blocking the path, don't run into him, that's all."

The old trail had never been used for wagons, but had been exclusively given over to pack-burros. Consequently it was narrow, and there were places where bunches of cactus grew so close that the boys had to leave their saddles and trundle their machines past by hand, in order to keep the sharp spines from puncturing the tires.

When the cactus bunches ceased to bother, the pack-trail swung into rocky ground, and the boys had to do some hair-raising stunts in following a bit of shelf with a sheer drop of thirty or forty feet on one side of them and a straight up-and-down wall on the other.

At last the trail climbed over a ridge and into easier ground. Huge piles of rocks flanked both sides of the way, but the going was smooth and level.

While they were passing through this strip of country, Matt suddenly heard voices behind him and to the left of the trail. The voices came from a considerable distance, and were muffled and indistinct, but Matt heard them plainly enough.

"Chub!" he called in a guarded tone, "ride around that pile of rocks on the left. Some one's

coming behind us and we'd better wait and see who it is."

Without pausing to ask any useless questions, Chub swerved from the trail and guided his motorcycle around the heap of boulders referred to by Matt. Matt followed him, and they screened themselves and their wheels as well as they could and peered curiously back along the trail.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOO LATE!

As the boys breathlessly watched, they saw a burro emerge from among the rocks on the left of the trail. There was no load on the burro's back, and the shaggy little animal was being driven by two ruffianly-looking men. One of the men had a club, and every once in a while he would reach over and hit the burro a heavy blow. The burro would flinch and leap ahead; then, apparently forgetting what had happened, would lag again and the blow would be repeated.

"The brute!" muttered Chub.

"Two brutes besides the burro," whispered Matt, "if I'm any judge of faces. Listen!"

The men had headed the burro along the trail, and would soon pass the point where Matt and Chub were hiding. They continued to talk as they approached. Evidently they were well pleased over something, for occasionally one of them would give a hoarse laugh.

"Hawley ort ter pay me well fer this," said one of the scoundrels. "You git half the claim, Jacks, purvidin' Hawley don't beat ye out o' it, but I'm only gittin' what I airn." [Pg 13]

"Don't ye be in no takin', Bisbee, erbout Hawley beatin' me out o' my share in the 'strike,'" replied Jacks. "He's an' ole fox, but he ain't no more of a fox'n what I am."

"Waal, I kin split on his game if he don't treat me right," scowled Bisbee; "I kin tell about smashin' that machine at the Bluebell this mornin', on my way out yar, an' I kin tell about what we done at the ole Santa Maria, with——"

At that interesting point the two rascals passed out of ear-shot. Chub, awed by what they had heard, stared excitedly at Matt.

"One of 'em was Jacks!" he muttered; "the four-flush with the club was the prospector who was threatenin' dad with trouble!"

"And the other's name is Bisbee," said Matt, "and he came out here this morning and smashed that wireless apparatus on his way. Hawley didn't lose much time getting busy after Perry gave him that letter!"

"They're goin' after dad now, that's a cinch!" exclaimed Chub. "Let's follow 'em right up, Matt, an' have a hand in what happens—that is, if anything is goin' to happen. I guess dad and you and me can take care of those two handy boys, all right."

By that time the two men and the burro were well out of sight, and the boys, mounting their machines, started slowly after them, working laboriously at the pedals, so that their presence in the vicinity might not be betrayed by the volleying of explosions.

As they proceeded, the rocks gradually disappeared from the sides of the trail and the country flattened into a level mesa. To the astonishment of Matt and Chub, nothing was to be seen of the two men on this level stretch.

"Where'd they go?" queried the puzzled Chub, stopping his machine for a few words with his chum.

"They must have left the trail again, back somewhere among the rocks," replied Matt.

"Then maybe we're off the track," suggested Chub anxiously. "If Jacks and Bisbee were going to the scene of dad's 'strike,' why——"

"We're not off the track," interrupted Motor Matt. "Look over there, Chub!"

Matt pointed as he spoke. Chub, following his chum's finger with his eyes, saw a dun-colored peak rising to the left of the trail, and half-way up the side of the uplift, the sun glimmered on a couple of intersecting lines that formed a cross.

"The white cross!" whispered Chub. "We're headed right, Matt, and no mistake. But where in Sam Hill are Bisbee and Jacks? If they weren't coming here, where *were* they goin'? Put me wise."

"Let's stop fretting about Bisbee and Jacks. The fortune of the McReadys lies over there, at the foot of that peak, and now's our chance to cinch it."

The words sent a thrill through Chub. Once more he remembered what this "strike" might mean to his father, and Susie and himself. Their years in Arizona had been lean enough, and all of them had felt the bitter pinch of poverty. Now, suddenly, Fortune had shown them her smile, and if they were to profit by it, they must beat down the evil schemes of the gambler. Hawley and his confederates alone stood between the McReadys and the goal toward which the prospector had been struggling for so long.

With a bounding heart Chub turned from the trail and headed straight for the white cross on the

peak.

"It takes you to ginger a fellow up, Matt!" cried Chub. "Dad's claim is almost in sight, and it won't be long before we're racing back to Phoenix with a location notice. I was beginnin' to feel discouraged, an' that's a fact, but I'm right on my toes now and sure we're goin' to win. Hurrah for the McReady strike!"

There was no trail where the boys were riding, but the ground was smooth and level and there was nothing to prevent them from making good speed. Only a quarter of a mile lay between the pack-trail and the claim, and the distance was soon covered.

"There are the monuments!" called Chub, waving his hand.

Matt looked ahead and saw a collection of stones. There were five of these piles, four standing at the corners of an oblong square, and marking the limits of the claim. In the center of the square was a heap as large as two of the others, and Chub kept on toward it.

As Matt followed, he saw that this large heap of stones had a short pole protruding from the middle. A board was fastened to the top of the pole, and there was a square, white paper tacked to the board.

When Chub reached the center monument he tumbled off his motor-cycle in the midst of a rude little camp. A pack-saddle lay on the ground, and near it was a canvas-wrapped bundle. A pile of wood was heaped near some smoke-blackened stones, and to one side were a dingy coffee-pot and a skillet.

"Dad's camp!" muttered Chub. "He bunked right down by his center monument and was bound Jacks shouldn't get the best of him. Plucky old dad!" Chub's voice trembled a little. "He's fought hard for this, Matt—nobody, not even Susie and me, knows how hard."

"It's a long lane, Chub," said Matt, "that has no turning. Hard luck can't dog a fellow always. Is that your father's pack-burro?"

Chub looked in the direction Matt was pointing. Off beyond the confines of the claim, a burro was grazing on the mesquit-bushes. A small spring was close by. The burro was hobbled so that he could not stray far from the camp.

"Sure enough!" laughed Chub; "that's old Baldy himself. When we come into our money, we'll put Baldy in a gold barn and let him stuff his old hide with patent breakfast-food."

"Maybe Baldy'll like that," laughed Matt, "and maybe he won't."

"Anyhow," grinned Chub, "he looks like he could stand a little stuffing with just plain hay. He's helped dad through the hills for the last five years—the two of them have gone thirsty and hungry together, and knocked into more hardships and out of them again than anybody'll ever know. But right here's where they win. Look at that 'blow-out,' will you, Matt?"

By "blow-out," Chub meant a lot of white quartz that was littering the ground in every direction. He picked up a piece and held it under Matt's eyes. The stone was flecked with little yellow grains.

"Gold!" cried Chub; "the rock's just full of it. Say, it's a wonder this claim's laid here as long as it has. I'll bet that dozens of prospectors have been around it—but it was dad that found 'er! Whoop-ee!"

Chub jerked off his cap suddenly and hurled it into the air; then, in the excess of his joy, he caught hold of Matt and whirled him around and around in the wildest kind of a dance. [Pg 14]

But there were some things about the situation which Matt couldn't understand. He hated to throw any cold water on Chub's effusive spirits, and yet he knew that they ought to probe to the bottom of the situation.

"Where's your father, Chub?" Matt inquired, as his chum let loose of him.

"Why, he must have set out for Phoenix to file the duplicate location notice," replied Chub, sitting down on the side of the rock pile. "You see, Matt, that letter was five days gettin' to us. Hawley had it for a day, and the Mexican must have had it longer than he admitted, or else dad was wrong in his dates when he wrote it. I guess dad got tired waiting for me to come out, and so he began to scratch gravel for Phoenix on his own hook."

Matt was wondering why Jacks and Bisbee had appeared so delighted during their talk on the pack-trail. From their manner, and what they had said, he had got the idea that they had accomplished something for Hawley.

"I thought your father didn't have any location blanks," went on Matt, "and that he wanted you to come and bring them."

"He must have found some blanks somewhere," returned Chub.

"Did he have a horse with him, besides the burro?"

Chub stared.

"Why, no, Matt," said he. "Prospectors don't ride. They just walk, an' drive their pack-burros ahead of them."

"Your father only had one burro?"

"That's all. What's buzzin' around in your nut, anyway, Matt?"

"I'm wondering why your father should pull out for Phoenix and leave old Baldy behind. He wouldn't walk all the way to town, would he, and leave the burro and his camp-truck here?"

The words startled Chub. A look of alarm drove all the joy out of his freckled face.

"Oh, slush! That's me, all right!" he muttered. "I'm goin' off half-cocked, as per usual. There's a whole lot of things I'm forgettin'. For instance, that talk we overheard between Jacks and Bisbee. That lacked a good deal of being encouraging to the McReadys. And then, again, where's Dace Perry? He ought to be around here somewhere, but I'm not seeing much of him. Anyhow," and Chub looked up at the board on top of the pole, "dad found his location notice somewhere, and we can't be euchred out of the claim."

"Look at the notice, Chub," suggested Matt. "See what sort of a name your father gave the claim."

"I'll make a guess that it's 'McReady's Pride,' or 'McReady's Hope,' or something like that," said Chub, climbing to the top of the rock pile.

Hanging to the pole, he brought his eyes close to the notice. Matt saw his hands grip the pole hard, while a cry of savage disappointment escaped his lips.

"What's wrong?" asked Matt.

Chub looked down dazedly at his chum.

"Why—why," he faltered huskily, "dad didn't put up this notice at all. The claim is named the 'Pauper's Dream,' and the locators are down as 'Jacks and Hawley.'"

"Jacks and Hawley?" echoed Matt.

"Yes," roared Chub, grabbing the notice and jerking it fiercely off the board, "the gambler's won out on us, Matt. Jacks has put up his notice, and some one is now on the way to Phoenix to file a duplicate."

Chub tumbled off the rock pile, sat on the ground at the foot of it, and covered his face with his hands.

"We got here, old fellow," said Chub brokenly, "but we got here *too late!*"

A wave of consternation rolled over Matt.

He had been fearing that something was wrong, but up to this moment he hadn't entertained the least notion that Hawley's dastardly plans had already succeeded.

"And the worst of it is, Matt," whispered Chub, looking up, "we don't know anything about dad. What have they done with him?"

CHAPTER IX.

HELD AT BAY.

"Don't worry about your father, Chub," said Matt. "Hawley will steal this claim if he can, but it's a cinch he'll do it in such a way the law can't get a hold on him. Your father has been trapped in some way, in order to get him off the claim so Jacks could put up his own location notice. You can be sure, though, that Jacks hasn't done anything very desperate. Brace up, old chap!"

"I can't," groaned Chub. "It's back to the woods for me. The gimp has all been taken out of me. Everybody in Phoenix always has a joke to crack at the McReadys. They call dad a 'rainbow-chaser,' and say he never can find any pay-rock the way he potters around. And now he's lost this chance! Maybe we'll never get another."

"Look here, Chub," said Matt, walking over to his chum and pulling him to his feet, "you're not a quitter and never have been. Don't try to be one now. Pull yourself together and face the music. *There's a chance yet!* But you're not going to help that chance any by acting like this."

"Chance?" repeated Chub dully, lifting his hopeless, freckled face to Matt's.

"Yes. You've got two location notices. Fill 'em out. Tack one on that board in place of the one you just pulled down, and we'll hustle the other one to the recorder's office in Phoenix."

"It's too late, I tell you!" insisted Chub. "Don't you understand what's been done? Jacks tacked his own notice up, and Perry is already on the way to Phoenix with a duplicate."

"Perry hadn't started, up to the time we got here," pursued Matt quickly. "If he had started, he'd have had to pass us. But suppose he did; suppose he has two hours the start of us—why, he's riding a horse that has already done twenty-five miles to-day, and a *motor-cycle can beat him out!*"

Matt's hopefulness and splendid confidence electrified Chub.

"You're a chum worth having if any one asks you," he burst out. "You're right, Matt; there is a chance yet, and this is no time to pull off any baby-act. I was rattled, that's all. The idea that a fortune had side-stepped the McReadys had got onto my nerves. Give me a pencil. Hanged if I don't jump dad's claim myself, just to save it from Jacks and Hawley."

Chub was now all energy and determination. Sitting down on the rocks once more, he took two

folded blanks from his pocket and laid them over a smooth, flat stone in front of him.

"We'll call this claim the 'Make or Break,'" he went on, taking the pencil from Matt and beginning to fill in the blank spaces; "it's in the Winnifred Mining District, and it's located by Mark McReady."

"Hold up, Chub," interposed Matt, "before you write your name down as the locator. You're several years this side of twenty-one. Would that make any difference?"

"It might," said Chub thoughtfully. "It'll be safer to put in dad's name, and then we'll be sure not to get stung. I'll fill out the two of them; then, while I'm tacking one to the board, you can take the other and make a getaway for Phoenix."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm goin' to hang around here an' look for dad. You'll make a quicker run to town than you would if I was along with that one-cylinder machine, anyhow."

Matt, whose mind was busy with the conversation he and Chub had overheard between Jacks and Bisbee, evolved a sudden idea.

"Is there a mine around here called the Santa Maria?" he asked.

"Seems to me I've heard of an old, played-out proposition by that name," answered Chub. "Why?"

"Do you remember what Bisbee said to Jacks while they were coming along the pack-trail? '*I can tell what we done at the old Santa Maria.*' Those were his words, Chub, and I've got a hunch that that's the place to go and look for your father."

"Bully!" said Chub. "You've got more horse-sense in a minute, Matt King, than Reddy McReady has in a year. Get ready to hike, old chap. I'll have this for you in about a minute."

"I'll go over to the spring and get a drink," answered Matt, "and then I'll turn the *Comet* loose."

The spring was some little distance away from the center monument where Chub was doing his writing. Matt hurried toward it, gave old Baldy a friendly slap as he passed him, and then went down on his knees at the edge of the rocky pool.

Matt was feeling tolerably easy in his mind. He knew what the *Comet* could do, and in order to help his friends, the McReadys, he would make the miles spin out from under the pneumatic tires as they had never done before.

It is usually at just such a time as that, when one feels as though he is about to accomplish something really worth while, that the unexpected bobs up to play hob with all his well-laid plans.

While Matt was on his knees, refreshing himself with the cool spring-water, a wild yell came from Chub. Matt was on his feet in a jiffy, and whirled just in time to see Chub take a header from the rock pile.

He must have finished filling out the notices and climbed to the top of the center monument to tack one of them to the board, when the unexpected arrived.

Matt saw Jacks on top of the stone heap, and it was he who had given Chub the shove that landed him on his hands and knees at the bottom of the pile. Chub got up angrily, and gathered in a scrap of paper that had dropped beside him; then he turned and faced the prospector, who was roaring and shaking his fist.

"What d'ye mean, ye red-headed whelp, by tamperin' with my location notice? Tryin' ter jump this here claim, hey? Waal, you scatter, an' do it quick! If ye don't, I'll kick ye clean off'n the map!"

Jacks was not the only enemy that had come to work havoc with the plans of Matt and Chub. Bisbee was there, also, and so—to Matt's intense amazement—was Dace Perry.

Perry was standing beside a saddle-horse. The animal had been ridden hard and was plainly far gone with fatigue.

Jacks and Bisbee, it now seemed to Matt, had gone off somewhere among the rocks to meet Perry. Jacks probably had pitched a camp near-by, where he had stayed while watching Chub's father; and, naturally, it would be to this camp that Perry would go to meet the ruffian. Having joined forces, all three of the plotters had advanced covertly upon Matt and Chub.

Matt ran forward, to place himself shoulder to shoulder with Chub. Perry saw him coming, and called Bisbee's attention to him.

"You stay whar ye aire!" yelled Bisbee.

As he gave the warning he lifted his hand, and Matt saw the sun glimmer on a piece of blued steel.

"Git over thar ter whar yer friend is," ordered Jacks, from the top of the stone pile. "We mean bizness right from the drop o' the hat, young feller, an' if that red skelp o' your'n is of any valley to ye, ye'll jump mighty prompt whenever I tune up!"

Chub held his ground, however, and Matt continued to come on.

"You're a pack of thieves," clamored Chub, "that's what you are! You're trying to steal this claim away from my father, but we're going to fool you."

"Ye're McReady's son, aire ye?" yelled Jacks. "Waal, now, McReady tried ter steal this claim away from me, an' when I git back, along comes you an' makes a similar kind o' break. Git away from here! My mad's up, an' I'm li'ble ter do ye damage. What's that ye got in yer hand? Grab it

away from him, Bisbee, then kick him off'n the claim."

Bisbee executed a rush in Chub's direction, but Matt was close enough by then to push out a foot and throw the ruffian heavily.

Bisbee, swearing furiously, arose to his knees and leveled the weapon he still clutched in his fingers. Before he could use it, Jacks had scrambled down from the rock pile and caught his wrist.

"None o' that, Bisbee!" said Jacks. "So long as the young whelps don't try ter interfere with us."

Matt and Chub ran back a few steps.

"It's the location notice, Matt," Chub whispered, "that I wanted you to take to town."

"Give it here, Chub," returned Matt, and took the paper and thrust it into the breast of his leather coat.

"It's a location notice!" sang out Perry. "I heard McReady tell King it was. Better take it away from him."

"I know a trick wuth two o' that," laughed Jacks hoarsely. "Kin you ride one o' them new-fangled bicycles, Perry?"

"Yes," replied Perry.

"Then pick out the best 'un an' ride fer Phoenix with that notice o' mine."

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Perry gave an exultant laugh and jumped for the *Comet*. Matt started forward.

"Keep away from that machine, Perry!" he cried.

"Draw a bead on him, Bisbee," said Jacks. "If he tries ter keep Perry from gittin' away, you know what ter do."

The gleaming weapon arose to a level with Bisbee's wicked little eyes, and Matt halted uncertainly. The pounding of the *Comet's* motor was already in his ears, and Perry was starting for the pack-trail.

While Matt stood there, wondering what he could possibly do, the *Comet* did something it had never done before. With a wheezy sputter, it stopped dead, refusing to answer the frantic twists Perry gave the handle-bars.

"Thought ye said ye could run it?" scoffed Jacks.

"Something's loose or broken," replied Perry, leaping from the saddle and letting the machine drop. "The other belongs to Ed Penny and I know it better. I'll take that."

A few moments later he was on the other motor-cycle and scurrying toward the trail. Jacks turned on Matt and Chub with a taunting laugh.

"I reckon you won't file no location notice ahead o' Jacks an' Hawley *this* trip!" he yelled.

CHAPTER X.

A DARING ESCAPE.

There had been so many ups and downs for Chub during the few hours he and Matt had been fighting for the claim that his discouragement now took a philosophical turn.

"There goes our last chance, Matt," said he, with a grim laugh. "It's what they call stealing your own thunder, ain't it, when a swift bunch of toughs act like that?"

Matt was mad clear through. His eyes snapped vindictively as he watched the exultant ruffians.

"The recorder closes his office in Phoenix at six o'clock?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then Jacks has played his trump card. The only way that location notice could be got to Phoenix in time to be recorded to-day was by sending Perry on the motor-cycle. When we left Delray, he said something about lending us a gun. I don't believe in guns, as a general thing, but if we had borrowed Delray's we could have met these scoundrels in their own way."

Matt's voice was low, but it throbbed with a fierce desire to do something—anything—which might still win the day for the McReadys.

"The biggest steal on record, that's what it is!" breathed Chub.

"You could prove it in any court in the country, Chub. With your father's testimony, and ours, you'll have a good case against Jacks and Hawley."

"It takes money for lawsuits," said Chub bitterly, "and the McReadys have been living from hand to mouth for more years than I care to think about. There's no use talking about a legal fight, Matt. Possession is nine points of the law, and the man who files his location notice first always holds the ground. We'll just sponge the 'Make or Break' off the McReady slate right now. For the rest of it, all I'm worrying about is dad."

"If you fellers hev got through with yer confab," shouted Jacks, "ye'll jest turn face-about an' jog

fer that scooped-out place in the foot o' the hill, right behind ye."

Matt looked around. The spot mentioned by Jacks was a jagged notch among the rocks, twenty-five or thirty feet long by a dozen wide, and with precipitous walls on all sides, except, of course, at the opening in front.

"What are you driving us into that hole in the rocks for?" demanded Matt.

"We like yer comp'ny so all-fired well," answered Jacks, with a hoarse laugh, "that we're goin' ter keep ye with us all night. Arter it gits dark, we kin hang onter ye easier if ye're bottled up in that cut-out."

"You're a nice pair of grafters—I don't think," flared Chub. "Somebody's goin' to settle for this business, and the more you pile it on the more you'll pay."

"We're able ter pay all we'll have ter," grinned Jacks, "but jest now you're follerin' my orders, *sabe*? Chase 'em in, Bisbee," he added, to his companion.

"Shoo!" said Bisbee, and started forward, waving his weapon.

"You're a couple of cowards!" yelled Chub, doubling up his fists. "You wouldn't dare shoot!"

"Come on, Chub," said Matt quietly, taking his chum's arm and leading him into the notch. "We'll have our innings later."

"But I don't want to be hung up in here all night," demurred Chub. "There's no tellin' what kind of a fix dad is in. We ought to be hunting for him."

"Don't fret. They've left your father so he'll be all right until you can find him, even if you can't take up the hunt until to-morrow. Just let 'em think their bluff is working, that's all."

Bisbee, with the revolver on his knees, had taken up his position at the front of the notch. From this position, even after it grew dark, he would be able to keep the boys from emerging from the cut-out.

Matt and Chub sat down on a couple of stones and leaned back against the steep wall behind them. Through the opening they could look out toward the claim and see Jacks taking Perry's horse to the spring. Saddle and bridle were stripped from the horse, and the animal was secured with a long rope and picket-pin. After taking care of the horse, Jacks went back to McReady's camp, started a fire, and began getting supper.

"Consarn 'em!" growled Chub, "they're taking everything in sight."

"We'll not make any kick," answered Matt, "so long as they give us our supper. I feel as though I'd been through a famine. Besides, we need food for our night's work."

He dropped his voice, to make sure Bisbee could not hear.

"Night's work?" echoed Chub. "About all the work we'll do to-night, Matt, will be to sit on these boulders and try to sleep."

"That's where you're wrong. When it's dark enough, and everything's quiet, I'm going to climb out of here, fix up the *Comet*, and take this location notice to Phoenix." [Pg 17]

"Shucks! What's the use? Even if you succeeded, you couldn't reach town before to-morrow. The other notice will have been recorded long before then."

"I'll not say we're beaten until the recorder himself tells me it's too late."

Admiration for his chum rose in Chub's eyes, although he shook his head hopelessly.

"That's your style, Matt—you never seem to know when you're down and out. How're you goin' to get out of here?"

Matt called Chub's attention to one of the side walls of the notch. There was more of a slope to the wall there than anywhere else, and Matt had already marked out his foot and hand holds, fixing half a dozen projecting stones and two or three straggling bushes firmly in his mind.

"In broad day," said Chub, "that climb would be hard enough, but at night you'd be sure to fall and break your neck. Cut it out."

"I'm going to make a getaway to-night," declared Matt firmly.

"Why couldn't the two of us get the better of Bisbee? We could drop on him during the night, and if we worked it right, that gun of his wouldn't cut any figure."

"I'd thought of that," said Matt, "but I've got to skirmish around the camp a little, you know, and tinker with the *Comet*. All that will have to be done secretly. My way's the best, I think."

"You'll have to excuse little Chub from prancing up that precipice. He thinks too much of his neck to risk it on any such fool stunt."

"When I'm ready to go I'll set up a yell. That will draw Bisbee and Jacks after me, Chub, and you can walk out of this hole in the hill as neat as you please."

That ended their talk for a while. Just then Jacks came to the opening of the notch, and set down a tin cup of coffee and a plate of soaked hardtack and fried bacon.

"Ye'll hev ter eat out o' the same dish an' drink out o' the same cup," said he. "This hotel's kinder short on plates an' cups. Howsumever, I don't reckon ye're anyways partic'ler."

He withdrew with a jubilant flourish, and the two chums fell to on their food. After it was eaten,

both of them felt a hundred per cent. better.

Night comes suddenly in that part of the Southwest. One minute it is daylight, and almost the next the stars are out and the coyotes yelping.

As night advanced a deep quiet fell over the captives and their captors. The horse and burro could be heard tramping around the spring, but these sounds, and the occasional bark of a coyote, were all that broke the stillness.

Bisbee, sitting by the entrance into the notch, was as upright and silent as a black statue. Jacks, with a blanket under him, was lying across the entrance and snoring. Midnight was passed and the hour had come for Matt to make his attempt, so he reached over and touched his chum on the shoulder.

"I'm off, old chap!" he whispered, his lips close to Chub's ear. "I've tied my shoes together by the laces and they're hanging around my neck—I can climb better and make less noise in my stocking-feet."

Chub reached out his hand and wrung Matt's fervently.

"I think it's foolish for you to try to get that notice to Phoenix, old chum," he answered, "but I appreciate what you're tryin' to do for the McReadys, just the same. If ever a fellow was true to his friends, it's a cinch that it's Motor Matt."

"I hate to pull out and leave you, Chub," went on Matt, "but there's only one motor-cycle, you know, and, besides, you can't leave here until you find out about your father."

"That's all to the good. We've got to separate. Good-by and good luck."

"Be ready to run when you hear me yell," finished Matt. "So-long, Chub."

It was as dark as a pocket in the notch, and Chub could not see Matt as he moved noiselessly across to the other wall. Presently, by straining his ears, Chub could hear muffled sounds—a sifting downward of sand, the faint crunch of a loose stone under a stockinged foot, a stifled breathing, as of some one working hard and trying to work quietly. Steadily the sounds mounted up and up. Chub, holding his breath, fixed his eyes on the blank darkness and waited. He almost fell off his boulder when he saw the blurred form of Bisbee lean forward, and heard him call:

"What ye doin' in thar, you two?"

"What's the matter with you?" retorted the quick-witted Chub. "We're tired out and want to sleep. Move over a little, Matt," he added, as though speaking to his chum, "you're takin' up more'n your half of the wall."

The blurred form straightened again, and once more Chub began to breathe. The sounds on the wall had ceased, and Chub began to count the seconds and mentally to check off the minutes.

Five minutes—ten—fifteen. Chub wasn't at all sure he was reckoning the time properly, but he began wondering what had become of his chum. The opposite side of the notch was the slope of the hill itself, and only child's play for Matt to get down. If he had got down, where was he?

Chub reckoned up fifteen minutes more. His nerves were in rags and he was imagining all sorts of wild things, when a booming shout came from the distance.

"Good-by, Jacks! You thought you had us, but you've got another guess coming!"

Bisbee leaped to his feet with a yell. Jacks broke off his snores suddenly and lifted himself up.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Them kids hev got away!" cried the startled Bisbee.

A clatter of hoofs, rapidly receding in the direction of the pack-trail, could be heard.

"They've took the hoss!" yelled Jacks. "Consarn 'em, anyways! Why didn't ye watch, hey? Come on! Mebby we kin stop 'em yit!"

Bisbee and Jacks scampered off into the shadows, talking and snarling at each other as they ran. Chub, losing no time, laughed softly to himself and hurried out of the notch.

It tickled him to think that Motor Matt's daring had won out, even though there wasn't much hope of his getting to Phoenix in time to save the claim. But why had Matt taken the horse? Chub had been expecting the explosions of a gasoline motor rather than the patter of hoofs.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 18]

A HARD JOURNEY.

There were few better athletes than Matt King, and he was in the pink of condition. It was a matter of pride with him to keep himself at all times fit and ready for whatever fate threw his way.

But scaling that steep wall, under the double necessity of doing it effectively and making little noise, was one of the hardest things he ever attempted. He had kept vividly in his mind the path he had mapped out, and the upward climb was merely the working out of a problem that he had already solved in theory; but he had to work out the problem in the dark, and to grope with his

feet for the projecting stones and with his hands for the bushes.

At last, with every muscle tingling and his breath coming hard through his tense lips, he drew himself over the crest of the wall. Here he paused for a moment's rest, and to put on his shoes. There was cactus on the hill-slope, and he didn't want to hamper himself by picking up a bunch of fish-hooks in his unprotected feet.

When near the top of the wall he had heard Bisbee's demand to know what was going on, and he had chuckled at Chub's response. Chub's ready wit, it might be, had made the escape successful.

Once in his shoes, Matt stole down the slope and made his way to the center monument on the claim. The *Comet* was lying just where Perry had let it drop. How Matt was to fix the machine in the dark he did not know, but he had had an idea that the motor-cycle had "bucked" because Perry did not understand just how to operate it.

His first disappointment came as he knelt down by the machine and detected a heavy odor of gasoline. After a minute or two of groping about, he made the startling discovery that the gasoline-tank was empty. The cap that closed the opening into the reservoir had become loosened in the fall, and all the gasoline had trickled out.

Here was a difficulty, and no mistake. Matt remembered having seen a gasoline-stove at the Bluebell, but he was under the impression that Delray didn't use the stove very much. If there was no gasoline to be had at the mine, then Matt would have to keep on to the Arizona canal, and try to get some at the first ranch he came to. There was no use now in looking for the trouble that had cut short Perry's flight on the *Comet*—that could be attended to later. What Matt had to do was to figure on getting a hundred-and-fifty pounds of mechanism to the Bluebell mine. To pedal the machine that distance, over the rough pack-trail with its sharp rocks and cactus, and at night, was a task he did not care to think about.

It was then that the idea of taking the horse appealed to him. The horse could carry both him and the machine, providing he used judgment in stowing the *Comet* on the animal's back.

Having made up his mind to get over the difficulty in this way, Matt raised the machine and trundled it toward the spring. To his satisfaction, he gathered that everything was serene in the vicinity of the notch. Not a sound reached him from there. If he had been nearer, perhaps he might have heard the resonant snores of the sleeping Jacks.

When he had come close to the horse, Matt laid the motor-cycle down and went up to the animal, whispering and stroking his neck to prevent a startled snort or jump. With his knife he cut the picket-rope off close to the pin, and after twisting the rope about the horse's lower jaw, in lieu of a bridle, he cut the rope again. This gave him not only enough for a bridle, but also some twenty feet of lashing for the *Comet*.

To hang the machine from the horse's back so that it would ride without injury to its mechanism was the next problem Matt had to solve. This was accomplished by first passing a loop of rope through the forks, and then drawing the machine up by the front with the rope over the horse's back.

Naturally, the horse objected to this unusual procedure, and a good part of the half-hour required by Matt in effecting his escape was consumed in getting the horse accustomed to his strange burden.

After the front of the *Comet* had been swung into place and fastened, Matt repeated the operation with the back of the machine and drew the rear wheel off the ground. The right pedal and toe-clip dug into the horse's ribs and caused a good deal of shying and side-stepping. But the interfering pedal had an advantage as well as a disadvantage, inasmuch as it braced the machine away from the horse's side and gave Matt room on the animal's back. His position, once he was astride the horse, was far from comfortable, but he thought he could make shift, at least, to ride until he had left the camp well behind.

Heading the horse toward the trail, he shouted his good-by to Jacks at the top of his lungs, and then urged the horse into a gallop with his heels and the end of the rope hackamore. The *Comet* slipped, and plunged, and rattled, but Matt supported it with one hand and let the frightened horse take his own gait.

He heard Jacks and Bisbee chasing after him, but was soon so far away that these sounds of pursuit were lost in the distance. A little later he turned into the pack-trail, and the most difficult part of his night journey lay ahead of him.

Matt could have hidden his machine away among the rocks and left it there while he galloped on to Phoenix. There would have been nothing to gain by this move, however, except an easier ride to the Bluebell. The office of the recorder would not be open for business before eight o'clock the next morning, and Matt had plenty of time to reach his destination. If he could get a supply of gasoline at the mine, and found that the *Comet* could be easily repaired, he would leave the horse with Delray and get back to town on the motor-cycle.

Before Matt had gone far along the pack-trail the difficulties of his position on the horse's back became so great that he was forced to dismount and walk. Even though he could have ridden comfortably, he would soon have been obliged to fall back on his own feet anyway. The trail was rough and hard to follow when it could be plainly seen, and now, when it twisted and turned through black arroyos and clung to the edge of half-hidden chasms, progress could only be safely made by going slowly and carefully.

Leading the horse by the rope, Matt picked out the course with the utmost care. Once he lost the

trail and was all of two hours finding it again; then the lashings of the *Comet* gave way suddenly, and the rear wheel dropped, causing the horse to give a frightened jump that nearly took him over the edge of a steep descent. At the most difficult part of the trail, where it ran along a shelf gouged out of the cliffs, Matt had to unship the wheel and swing it from the other side, in order to keep it from colliding with the rocks and being broken.

Before the *barranca* and the Black Cañon were reached, a quivering line of gray had run along the tops of the eastern hills. Morning was at hand, and Matt, who had been working like a Turk through the dark hours, was not yet at the Bluebell!

"The *Comet* has made me a heap of trouble," he muttered, "but I'll take the kinks out of the old girl when we get to the Bluebell, and then there'll be clear sailing all the way to town. It's about time I struck a streak of luck, seems to me. If Delray has any gasoline——"

Matt broke off the remark suddenly, wincing as he thought of an added jaunt of five miles to the canal, leading the horse or pedaling a heavy motor-cycle. If luck ever did anything for him, he hoped it would show itself at the Bluebell.

The sky was bright with coming day when Matt turned into the *barranca*, and the sun was up when he came in sight of the house and derrick at the Bluebell. There was some one on foot in the road, far away toward the canal. When Matt drew up by the house he saw that the approaching man was Delray.

"I wonder if Del is still gadding about looking for the fellow who smashed the wireless instrument?" thought Matt, setting to work unloading the *Comet*.

But it was something else that had taken Delray abroad that morning. He came, puffing, just as Matt got the *Comet* on the ground.

"Well, by thunder!" exclaimed the watchman. "What's the matter with the machine? Where's Chub? Say, but I've had the duse of a time!"

Delray mopped his face with a handkerchief and looked excited, and curious, and a little bit chagrined.

"First off, Del," said Matt, "have you got any gasoline? Don't tell me you haven't! It's the one thing I need just now more than anything else."

"That's right," cried Delray, surprising Matt with a fresh show of excitement, "if you ever needed gasoline, you need it now. But I don't think I've got a drop. Haven't used the gasoline-stove for a month, and it seems to me the can was empty when I last tried it. But wait; we'll make sure."

Delray darted into the house. In a moment he came rushing back with a can.

"There's some here, but I don't know how much," said he.

"Bully!" exclaimed Matt. "A quart will take me to Phoenix on the high speed."

He began working while he kept up a flow of talk.

"Chub's in the hills, looking for his father, who's mysteriously missing from the claim. Jacks and a rascal named Bisbee held us up yesterday afternoon while Perry got away on Chub's wheel. Jacks and Bisbee tried to keep us bottled up in a hole in the rocks all night; but we managed to get away. Chub's going to look around for his father, and I'm going to take his father's location notice to Phoenix. Seen anything of Perry?"

"Seen anything of him?" muttered Delray; "well, I should say I had! He came puffing along here yesterday afternoon, on Chub's motor-cycle, and I jumped for the road and headed him off. He tried to run me down, but I grabbed him. Why, he was all night in the house with me. He begged me to let him go, and tried to bribe me, but I was thinking of Chub and held onto him. About half an hour ago Tom Clipperton rode up on horseback. He was looking for you and Chub. I stepped out to talk with him, and while I was explaining the situation, we heard the popping of that motor-cycle, and saw Perry darting along the road. I had a rope on Perry's hands, and how he ever got rid of it is more'n I know. Clipperton took after him just a-smoking, but he might as well have tried to chase a lightning express-train on a hand-car. I ran down the road a ways, and was just coming back when I saw you."

All this set Matt's nerves to tingling. Here was an unexpected stroke of luck. Perry had been held up all night at the Bluebell! Even though he had got away, there was a chance to overtake him. Matt flung down the can, adjusted the needle-valve of the gasoline shut-off which he had found out of order, and tried the motor. She took the spark finely, and was apparently in as good shape as before she had "bucked" with Perry.

"Bully for you, Del!" cried Matt. "Perry leads me by half an hour?"

"Yes; but that's a whole lot, and——"

Matt did not hear the rest. He was off down the road, with the cylinders sweetly purring and the rubber tires kicking up a cloud of dust.

The fatigue of his night work dropped from him, and he felt as fresh and fit as though he had had his usual amount of rest and sleep.

Once more his face was set toward Phoenix, and he felt equal to anything.

CHAPTER XII.

A STOUT HEART AND PLENTY OF HOPE.

Dace Perry was only half an hour in the lead!

Had he been mounted on Motor Matt's two-cylinder, seven-horse-power marvel, this would have meant that, with fearless and skilful riding, he was already in Phoenix; but Perry was on a one-cylinder machine, that would have to be nursed by a proficient rider in order to do even thirty miles an hour.

Matt figured that Perry would do twenty, or twenty-five. In other words, Perry's lead, as Matt reckoned it, was ten or twelve miles. Could the *Comet* reel off a score of miles while Perry was doing the eight or ten that lay between him and the recorder's office?

Reason assured Matt that he had a fighting chance. There was a mile a minute in the *Comet* if Matt cared to let her go the limit and risk his neck. [Pg 20]

Notch by notch he opened her out. Why not do a mile a minute? There was less sand just ahead and better ground. Besides, he was working for Chub and Susie, and what good was a fellow who wouldn't risk his neck for his friends?

This was a race for a fortune. It made little difference to Motor Matt that it was a fortune for the McReadys and not for himself that trembled in the balance.

The hills melted away behind the speeding motor-cycle. The rise and fall of the road had little effect on the speed, and the tremendous momentum of one hundred and fifty pounds of steel, backed by a hundred and thirty more of brawn and daring, fairly lifted the *Comet* over the high places.

Ahead of Matt were a horse and rider. The horse was galloping in Matt's direction, but took the roadside at a frightened leap as the motor-cycle sped by.

The horseman shouted and waved an arm. It was Tom Clipperton, the descendant of a noble line of genuine owners of the soil—the Indians. What he said Matt could not hear, and Matt dared not take a hand from the grip-control to wave an answering hail. However, he yelled a greeting, and the cry trailed out behind him and died suddenly in the speed of his flight.

That was not the first time Motor Matt had raced along the Black Cañon road. He had done it once before, but his speed then was not what it was now. That other time the *Comet* was new to him, but since that he had come to know the machine in every part as he knew his two hands.

Before he fairly realized it, he was at the canal. The *Comet* seemed to take the bridge at a flying leap, and was off and away through shady lanes of cottonwood-trees.

He passed several wagons and carriages coming toward him. They got out of the way and gave his charging steel wonder a wide berth. Occasionally he had to slow down to pass a vehicle moving toward Phoenix, but not often. The road was wide, and clean, and hard from edge to edge.

Speed and more speed! That was all Matt was thinking of then. The itch to eat up the miles as they had never been devoured before was racing hot through his veins. He would make a record from the hills to Phoenix this time which would stand unequalled for a long time.

He whirred across the second canal. His next bridge would be the one that spanned the town-ditch, and then he would be only a short half-mile from the court-house plaza, and the place where location notices were put on file.

As he struck the last lap of country road and looked away toward the beginning of the angling thoroughfare known as Grand Avenue, he glimpsed a flurry of dust. That was Perry, fanning along on the one-cylinder machine.

Matt was gaining on Perry hand over fist. As the dust blew aside, Matt could see Perry looking back, then turning again and coaxing Penny's wheel to fresh endeavor.

"I've got him," thought Matt exultantly, "and he knows it! He'll begin to understand, one of these days, that crooked work can make lots of trouble, but was never known to pay in the long run."

Perry, no doubt, was greatly astounded at sight of Motor Matt. He had left Matt in the hands of Jacks and Bisbee, and he had left the *Comet* temporarily useless. Small wonder if his brain was dazed and bewildered by the sight of that hurricane closing in on him from the rear.

If Chub and Clip had any fault to find with Matt, it was because they thought him too "easy." This was because he had a habit of looking for the good qualities in a fellow, rather than for the bad ones. Perry, according to Matt, would have been all right if he hadn't got a wrong start; and Matt had even hinted to Chub that there might be something good even in that scheming follower of fortune's wheel, Dirk Hawley.

Chub and Clip couldn't understand this kind of talk. They realized that it didn't show weakness, for they had sampled Matt's fiber too many times not to know his underlying strength of character. So they laid it up to eccentricity, and called it a hobby. Matt, however, called it a "principle"—and he had been known to fight like a wildcat for his "principles."

Matt's mind was resting easy. He felt that the race was as good as won, that he would soon pass Perry, reach the court-house, and have the McReady location on file a good two minutes before Perry could reach the plaza.

And just at that moment, when the whole matter of the McReady "strike" was looking its

brightest, the unexpected happened again and changed the complexion of affairs.

Matt was close to Perry—not more than a couple of hundred feet behind him, and still gaining rapidly—when he saw a white horse, ridden by a well-dressed young woman, riding toward them from the direction of Grand Avenue.

The horse was mettlesome and high-spirited, and the sight of Perry's motor-cycle sent the animal leaping toward the roadside. The girl was a good rider—Matt could see that at a glance—but the horse was giving her all she could manage.

Perry's proper move, in such a case, would have been to slow down—even to stop, if the actions of the horse and the safety of the rider seemed to demand it.

But Perry was thinking only of the recorder's office and never slackened pace.

The white horse plunged against the fence and reared high in the air. The girl, however, clung pluckily to the saddle. [Pg 21]

Matt, completely absorbed in the girl's peril, lessened his speed and watched the progress of events. Then, with his heart in his throat, he shut off the gasoline and clamped on the brake.

One of the reins had snapped apart during the girl's frantic tugging at the bit. Entirely out of control, the frenzied animal flung off down the road, the piece of rein dangling from the bit-ring and the girl clinging desperately to the saddle. Her hat was lost and her yellow hair was streaming out behind her.

Matt's first impulse had been to leave his machine and rush to the girl's assistance, but before he could pull his feet from the toe-clips, the horse was past him and careering along on its wild course.

There are times when, in the space of a lightning-flash, a person's mind will deal with every conceivable phase of a situation. It was like that with Matt as the white horse and helpless rider went tearing past him.

Unless something was done to stop the runaway animal, the girl would probably be thrown and perhaps killed. Against what he might do for the girl, Matt, for the fraction of an instant, balanced his duty to the McReadys. Then he used the pedals, turned on the gasoline, and switched on the spark. But instead of going on to Phoenix and the recorder's office, he turned the *Comet* and raced after the girl.

CHAPTER XIII.

MATT WINS—AND LOSES.

Motor Matt had seven horses in the twin-cylinders to pit against that one frantic animal that was slashing along the road toward the canal. There was but one thought in his mind, and that was to spur the seven horses into a speed that could overtake the one before it reached the bridge and the water.

He had been racing for a fortune before, but it was for a human life now. With keen, steady eyes he gaged the chances. The white horse was thundering along in the middle of the road, with the scrap of rein dangling on the left side of the bit. He aimed the *Comet* to bring up on the left side of the frightened beast.

He was half a minute, perhaps, in coming alongside the horse, and during that brief interval he had a brief glimpse of the thrashing, steel-shod heels. A heart's beat later he was abreast of the girl and saw her white, fear-drawn face looking down at him. In another breath he was close to the horse's head.

The time had come when Matt was to put forth his best effort, and win or lose at a single throw of the die. If the horse got away from him— But he was not thinking of that; he was thinking how he could best hold the animal and bring him to a stop.

The girl, far gone with fright, was swaying dangerously in the saddle.

"Steady!" cried Motor Matt, reaching for the head of the runaway horse.

His outstretched hand caught the piece of flying rein. It was his right hand he had to use, and he doubled the rein about the palm twice. Then a twist of the left handle-bar caused the *Comet* to slow down, and he pulled back on the bit.

The frenzied horse, however, was not to be stopped so easily. Lurching ahead with a fresh leap, he dragged Matt from the machine, and carried him, a dead weight, for a dozen yards.

Matt hung like grim death to the piece of rein, and his hundred and thirty pounds finally brought the horse to a standstill. As Matt floundered to his feet, the girl toppled into his arms—and the horse jerked loose and went on.

But Matt was not concerned about the horse. The girl was saved, and that was enough for him.

Dizzy and weak, he staggered with her to the roadside and laid her down beside an irrigation-ditch. Hearing some one behind him, he turned and saw a buckboard containing a man and woman. The man had halted the rig, and was handing the reins to the woman. The woman was

leaning from the seat and peering anxiously at Matt and the girl over the side of the vehicle. The man sprang down and hurried toward Matt.

"Finest thing I ever saw!" declared the man. "That girl might have been killed if it hadn't been for you. Say, you're a plucky piece, and——" The man stopped and stared. "Why, hello!" he went on. "You're Motor Matt, the lad that won the bicycle-race at the park a few days ago. Say, Malindy," he called to the woman, "this is Motor Matt. You've heard about him. He's the boy that won the race from O'Day, of Prescott."

"The young woman, Silas!" returned the woman. "Was she hurt?"

"She's only fainted, I think," said Matt.

"It's a wonder the fellow on that other machine wouldn't stop," growled the man. "If he'd acted like he'd ought to, the horse wouldn't have run off with the girl. What was the matter with him?"

"We were racing for the recorder's office," explained Matt. "We've both got notices to file, and the one that gets there first——"

"Oh, ho! That's it, hey? And you thought more of saving the girl than you did of beating him! Here, shake! It's sort of refreshing to meet a boy like you. If your machine isn't busted, you hike right along, and maybe you'll beat the other chap yet. We'll take care of the girl, and see that she gets where she belongs in town. Hitch the horses, Malindy," he added to the woman, "and come here and help."

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Matt started off, limping as he went.

"Are you hurt?" shouted the man.

"Jolted up a little, that's all," answered Matt, stopping to pick up his cap.

He was worrying about the *Comet*. Had he smashed it when the horse jerked him out of the saddle?

By what seemed like a miracle, the motor-cycle had escaped injury. The jar of its fall had closed the gasoline shut-off, and he picked the machine out of the dust and once more got into the seat.

Was there any use in going on to the court-house, he was asking himself. He felt more like going to his boarding-house and hunting for a bottle of arnica.

Remembering that he had told Chub he wouldn't consider himself beaten until the recorder had told him Perry had already filed Jacks' location notice, he set the motor going and wheeled rapidly on toward Grand Avenue.

He was about five minutes getting to the court-house. While he was bracing the motor-cycle up against the steps at the entrance, Perry came out of the building, followed by Dirk Hawley.

"Here's King," laughed Perry, "just a little bit late."

"Just a little," chuckled Hawley. "It won't do you any good to butt in here, King."

"How do you know what I'm doing here?" demanded Matt.

"Oh, I'm a pretty fair guesser. Run along home, an' tell the McReadys their little scheme wouldn't work."

Matt, however, climbed doggedly up the steps, entered the corridor, and made for the place where location notices were filed.

"Was a location notice filed here just now for Jacks and Hawley?" he asked of the clerk.

"Right you are; just about two minutes ago."

"Much obliged," said Matt. "That's all."

He went out and got on his machine, but instead of steering for Mrs. Spooner's, he made for Chub McReady's. Susie was there, and he would tell her the whole story. If he hadn't stopped to chase that runaway horse, he would have been able to beat Perry to the court-house and so save a fortune for his friends. They had to be told how he had failed and why.

Welcome Perkins was smoking a pipe on the porch as Matt rode up. He jumped excitedly to his feet when he saw who was coming.

"Howdy, pard!" he called. "Did you an' Chub do the trick? Did ye beat out them villains, Jacks an' Hawley? Snakes alive, Matt, don't say ye didn't! From the looks o' yer face, I'm argyin' ye've had bad luck. Oh, ye ort to hev took me! Ye ort to hev let me take keer o' this."

Hearing Welcome's loud talk, Susie came out on the porch.

"Why, Matt!" she exclaimed. "Where's Mark? Didn't he come with you?"

Matt shook his head as he climbed up the steps.

"What's the matter with ye?" demanded Welcome. "I don't reckon I ever seen ye quite so cut up afore, Matt. Somethin' must hev gone a hull lot crossways to make *you* pull sich a face."

"Nothing has happened to Mark, has there, Matt?" queried Susie anxiously.

"A good many things have happened to both of us, Susie, since we left here," said Matt; "but Chub's all right."

"You're kind of pale, Matt," went on Susie solicitously. "Here, take this chair."

"What makes ye limp?" queried Welcome. "Hawley been roughin' things up with ye? Shade o' Gallopin' Dick! I never felt so all-fired worked up about anythin' as I do about that there 'strike' o' Jim's. Tell me right out, Matt, hev ye saved the claim?"

"No," answered Matt heavily, as he sank into the chair, "we've lost out—and it's my fault."

There followed a short silence, Welcome muttering and twisting at his mustache, Susie peering keenly at Matt's pale face, and Matt staring at the cottonwood-trees down by the town canal.

Susie was the first to speak. Stepping quietly to Matt's side, she laid a small hand on his shoulder.

"You've lost out, Matt," said she, "and if it's your fault, as you say, then there's a good reason *why* you lost out. Money isn't everything in this world."

"Mebby not," spoke up Welcome dryly, "but it sartinly buys a lot o' grub, an' clothes, an' critter comforts. The McReadys could stand a few o' them same comforts, I reckon. Sometimes, gal, when I see how ye're pinchin' along, an' Chub is hampered fer money to git things to do his inventin' with, I vow I can't hardly keep from hikin' fer the hills an' holdin' up a few stages. It ain't right, I know, but the ole lawless feelin' bubbles up mighty strong, oncet in a while. If you an' Chub had waited an' asked fer my advice afore racin' off like ye done, Matt, mebbly ye'd be hevin' a diff'rent story ter tell. Howsumever, tell the details. Ye lost, an' the biggest part o' the shock is over. The McReadys'll continner ter struggle along on bacon an' spuds, instid, as I had fondly hoped, bein' promoted to canned stuff. What ye hangin' fire fer, Matt? Go on an'——"

"You don't stop talking long enough to give him a chance, Welcome," said Susie.

"That's right," snorted Welcome; "blame *me*! Blame the ole ex-pirate o' the plains fer every bloomin' thing that happens. I'm expectin' ye'll be sayin' next that it's my fault kase Matt an' Chub couldn't beat out Jacks an' Hawley. Don't fergit, young lady, I'm grub-staked fer the hills, an'——"

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"Dry up!" cried Matt, and he said it so suddenly, and in such a tone that the old man keeled over against one of the porch-posts. Matt smiled a little. "You're doing all the talking, Welcome," he added, "and not saying anything, and here I sit with something to say and not able to get a word in edgeways."

"Git in yer word," snapped Welcome, stamping his wooden pin on the porch, "git in a dozen words, or a millyun of 'em. 'Pears like ye kin *talk* a heap even if ye can't *do* anythin'."

Welcome glared, began filling his pipe, and sat down on the top step of the porch. Before Matt could begin, Tom Clipperton hurried in at the gate and ran along the walk and up the steps. He was covered with dust, and was plainly just in from a hard, trying ride, but there was a glow in his black eyes as he reached over and grabbed Matt's hand.

"Great! Everybody's talking about it. I'm proud of you."

"Somethin' more we can't understand," growled Welcome. "What's great? What's everybody talkin' about? Where'd you come from, anyway?"

"Matt was racing for town with Perry," went on Clipperton. "Perry had Penny's motor-cycle. Matt had the *Comet*. Matt was overhauling Perry at every jump. He'd have beat him in and filed the McReady location before Perry filed Jacks' and Hawley's. But Matt stopped to catch a horse that was running away with a girl. Perry's machine scared the horse. Catch *him* stopping! That's why Motor Matt lost out. Claim or no claim, everybody's proud of Matt."

"Did you do *that*, Matt?" asked Susie, a soft light in her wide, brown eyes as she looked at him.

"Why, yes," said Matt. "I couldn't get out of it."

"I'm proud of you, too," said Susie quietly. "What you did was worth a dozen claims."

"Money's money," growled old Welcome. "I ain't got no use fer dad-binged sentiment when it's so hard fer the McReadys to scrub along."

"There's more to it," said Clipperton. "I've got something else to tell."

"What's that, Clip?" queried Matt.

"The girl you saved was Edith Hawley. Dirk Hawley's daughter."

Matt sank back in his chair, dumfounded.

CHAPTER XIV.

A QUEER TANGLE.

"Waal, I'm stumped!" snorted Welcome. "Matt stops his race ter save Dirk Hawley's gal, an' Dirk Hawley wins a bonanzer mine bekase o' it. Looks to me like a put-up job. Mebbly the gal was bein' run away with a-purpose."

"Welcome!" reproved Susie sharply.

"That's right," whimpered the old man. "Jump onter me. Anyways, you know Dirk Hawley wouldn't be above doin' of a thing like that."

"They say Edith Hawley is a fine girl," said Susie, "and just as different from her father as can be."

I've heard that Hawley fairly worships her, and it's nonsense to think he'd let her risk her life to keep Matt from beating Perry to the recorder's office. But it's a queer tangle, isn't it, Matt?" she added, turning to her brother's chum.

"Mighty queer," answered Matt. "I'd have stopped and helped the girl, just the same, even if I had known who she was."

"Of course you would!" declared Susie.

"You must have made a fast ride into town, Clip," said Matt.

"Hit a high place, now and then," answered Clip. "You didn't hit any."

"Why did you leave town?"

"Saw Perry's chum, Ratty Spangler. He told me where Perry had gone. Then I got a horse and started out early this morning. Didn't know what I could do, but I wanted to do something. After you passed me on the road I tore in behind you. A good ways behind," Clip added. "Left my horse at the corral and hustled straight for here. It was the corral boss who told me what you'd done."

"Susie an' me hev been waitin' fer quite a spell to hear what Matt done," complained Welcome. "We got a right to know, seems like."

"Wait till I get dinner," said Susie, "then we can talk while we eat."

"Prime idea," agreed Matt. "I was too busy to eat breakfast, and Chub and I had a mighty slim supper last night."

"I'll hurry as fast as I can," said Susie, starting into the house. "You're to stay, Clip."

The loss of a fortune hadn't seemed to make much of an impression on Susie. On the contrary, she seemed pleased to think that Matt had turned aside from the race with Perry to stop the runaway horse and save Edith Hawley.

Clip went into the house after a bandage and a bottle of arnica, and proceeded to take care of one of Matt's shins, which had been badly skinned when he was jerked from the motor-cycle.

Clip was a master-hand at anything of this sort, and, besides, inherited from his Indian forefathers the keen eye and subtle sense that go to make a born tracker, whether in the woods, or on mountain and plain.

"Hawley an' Perry hev been purty thick," mused Welcome, while the bandaging was going on, "an' I'm kinder sorter wonderin' what Hawley'll say when he l'arns it was Perry as skeered his darter's hoss."

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"Perry did a big thing for Hawley by winning that race," said Clip. "Hawley's all for money, no matter how it's made. He'll forget about Perry's scaring the horse."

"An' only to think it was Hawley's gal got between the McReadys an' a fortun'," groaned Welcome. "I shore won't sleep nights thinkin' about it. It's goin' to ha'nt me. Mebey it'll drive me into the hills fer good an' all."

"If Delray hadn't come out of the house to talk with me," said Clip, "Perry wouldn't have got away from the Bluebell. He went like a streak when he came. Couldn't either of us stop him."

"Funny how things turn out sometimes," mused Matt.

"Why don't you come back to school, Matt?" asked Clip, with his usual abruptness in jumping from one subject to another. "Finish out the term, I mean, before you go to Denver. You've got ten friends there to Perry's one."

A tinge of sadness crossed Matt's face.

"I haven't any folks that I know of, Clip," said he, "and I'm up against a financial stringency. I'm going to Denver and get something to do."

"Short on folks myself," grunted Clip. "And about as short on money. What you going to do there?"

"I think I'll get into the automobile business—driving a car, or something like that. I've got to be among the motors, Clip, in order to be happy."

"I'll buy Perry's motor-cycle and go with you. Never had a friend like Motor Matt. Don't want to let you get away."

Clipperton was as sudden in his resolutions as he was in his talk. Matt lifted his eyes quickly, and there was that in Clipperton's look which led him to reach over and grip his hand.

"We'd hook up like a house afire, Clip," said Matt heartily, "but you'd better think it over."

"I've got my way to make, same as you. Let me hitch my string to your kite. Maybe I can help. Don't have to think it over. You know they haven't ever made it very happy for me here," said Clipperton, his eyes flashing and chest heaving with the indignation that filled his soul.

At that moment, Susie came to the door and announced dinner. While they were eating, Matt struck into the experiences that had fallen to him and Chub. Beginning with the trouble caused by the freighter at the Bluebell Mine, he followed on down to the point where he had stopped the runaway horse. That incident he glided over, and finished by telling of his encounter with Hawley and Perry on the court-house steps. As he very well knew would be the case, Susie began at once to worry about her father. Welcome pushed away from the table, leaving his dinner half-eaten.

"It's up to me," said he excitedly. "I knowed it u'd come. I'll git out ole Lucretia Borgia an' hike fer the mountings immediate. Jim McReady's my pard, an' if a hair o' his head has been teched, I'll mow down Jacks, an' Bisbee, an' Hawley an' everybody else that's had a hand in his undoin'. Everybody listen to me! It's Eagle-eye Perkins, the Terror o' the Plains, what's talkin'. Don't grieve, gal," he added, turning to Susie, "I'll go out there an' I'll bring Jim back, or I'll leave my ole carkiss among the rocks."

Welcome thumped his chest—and immediately began to cough.

"Where's Lucretia Borgia, gal?" he demanded. "I been missin' 'er fer a day or two."

"Lucretia Borgia" was the high-sounding and significant name Welcome had bestowed upon an ancient revolver. The weapon had not been discharged in a dozen years, and owing to its rusty condition firing it had apparently ceased to become a possibility.

"I—I threw it down the cistern, Welcome," said Susie. "The old trinket was harmless enough, but I was afraid it would get you into trouble."

Welcome stared.

"Trinket!" he mumbled. "Throved it down the cistern! Lucretia Borgia, with all them tur'ble recordin' notches on the handle! This here's the last straw! I'm goin', right now, an' with nothin' on me no more'n a jack-knife with a busted blade! But I'll git Jim. He's my pard, he is, an' he's allers treated me *white*."

Welcome grabbed his hat and started for the door. Just as he reached it, a tall man with grayish hair and beard stepped through and collided with him.

"Father!" screamed Susie.

"Jim!" whooped Welcome. "Waal, snakes alive! We was jest thinkin' ye'd never git back till ole Welcome went out an' brought ye in!"

"Don't overlook me," piped the voice of Chub, as he pushed through the door behind his father. "Howdy, Matt! I knew you were here when I saw the *Comet* out in front. Clip, too! Well, well, here's a gatherin' of the faithful, an' no mistake."

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST SURPRISE.

Mr. McReady and Chub could not have arrived at a more fitting moment. At no time had Matt done very much worrying on account of McReady, senior, for he had all along believed that the prospector was in no particular danger from Jacks and Bisbee. Those two worthies would go as far as they dared, but they would stop short of any desperate work. Hawley would have seen to that, even if Jacks and Bisbee had allowed their ardor to run away with their judgment.

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After the prospector had kissed Susie and shaken hands with Matt and Clip, two more plates were put on the table, and for half an hour those present listened to what had happened to the head of the McReady family.

"I've had a tough time of it, and no mistake," said the prospector. "For the biggest part of my trip it was just the same old scramble through the hills, gopherin' around and horn-spooning nothing that had a speck of color. I was near discouraged, thinking how old a man I was getting to be, and how my family was drifting along and kicking the wolf off the door-step every morning. I started for home, allowing I'd get some kind of a job in town, and chance brought me along that old pack-trail. Knowing about the spring under the peak with the white cross, I went there to camp for the night—and then through sheer accident I struck that blow-out of white quartz with the rock just glittering with yellow specks. It took me half of the next day to locate the lode, and while I was pilin' the monuments I looked up and saw that villain, Jacks.

"I had been running across Jacks frequently, during the trip, and it began to dawn upon me that seeing him so much wasn't altogether a coincidence. Everybody knows that Dirk Hawley grub-stakes him, although why Jacks wanted to trail after such an unsuccessful prospector as I am was a mystery. However, there he was, just at the time I had made my 'strike,' pushing toward me threateningly. He said that it was his claim, and that I had no business piling my monuments on it. I asked him why he hadn't piled his own monuments on the claim, if it was his. He hadn't anything to say to that, but tried to run me off the ground.

"Well, instead of his running me off he got run off himself, and I could see him hanging around at a safe distance, keeping an eye on me. When I got ready to put up my location notice, I was thunderstruck to find that I had lost my bundle of blanks. Jacks, no doubt, had blanks, for they're a prime part of every prospector's equipment, but of course I couldn't expect him to let me have a couple; and if I left the claim and tried to get any, Jacks could tack up a location notice of his own and make a run to Phoenix with a duplicate.

"Chub was the boy I thought of to get me out of that fix, but I didn't even think of him as a possibility until Pedro Morales came along the pack-trail with a couple of burros loaded with mesquit and palo-verde. I stopped the Mexican and made him wait while I took the wrapper off of some candles and wrote that letter; then, scratching out the original address on an old envelope, I wrote Chub's name over it, told Morales where to go to find the boy, and gave him some money

and sent him on.

"Then I waited, and watched, and hoped, all the time keeping as wary an eye on Jacks as he was holding on me. I never left the claim once, and I had a good-sized club of ironwood which I was ready to use on the slightest provocation.

"Well, the days passed and Chub didn't come. I was hoping Jacks might go away for a spell and give me a chance to slip over to the Bluebell and flash a wireless message to Phoenix, but the rascal seemed glued to the spot. Finally, one day, Jacks walked over with a white flag. He said he wanted to see if we couldn't compromise, as he called it. I kept my club handy and watched him like a cat as we talked. But the trouble was I didn't do any looking behind me. First thing I knew I was grabbed around the arms from the rear, then Jacks jumped forward, and I found myself in the hands of two men, one of them being Bisbee. Hawley had sent Bisbee out to help Jacks get the better of me. Too late I realized how I had been trapped, but there was nothing I could do.

"The scoundrels tied me hand and foot, loaded me onto Jacks' burro, and took me two miles away to the old Santa Maria shaft. The Santa Maria was abandoned years ago, and Jacks and Bisbee lowered me down to the bottom of the shaft, left a little food and water, and went away. The old ladders had long since decayed and fallen away, so I couldn't have been more of a prisoner if I had found myself behind bars and stone walls. Chub can tell you the rest."

"You bet I can," put in Chub. "If it hadn't been for Matt's plucky getaway from that hole in the rocks, it's a cinch dad would probably have been down in the old shaft yet. When you gave that husky yell, Matt, Jacks and Bisbee thought we had both got away. They rushed off after you, and all I had to do was to hike out. I had time to take Old Baldy, and I set out on a night search for the Santa Maria, as you told me to do. I had a notion where the old mine was, although I didn't know exactly, an' of course night was a bad time to find anything I was so hazy about. But sure I had luck in my jeans. I stumbled on a camp of Mexican wood-cutters, and one of 'em took me to the Santa Maria. I can tell you I was mightily relieved when dad answered me from down in the shaft and said he was all right. The wood-cutter got a rope and we snaked dad out in a brace of shakes. Then we began to scratch gravel for the Bluebell, gettin' there about half an hour after you had left, Matt.

"Course dad an' me felt good when Del told us how he had held Perry a prisoner all night, an' how he had only got away half an hour ahead of you. Still, I wasn't indulgin' in any extra high hopes, and neither was dad. We just figured on coming into Phoenix, taking turn about riding the horse you had left at the Bluebell, when, just as though we had planned it, along came Major Woolford in his automobile. He had been out to the Montezuma Mine, and was on his way to town. He brought us in, and when we got here we heard how you came so near skinning Perry out of that race, and how you lost by side-stepping to grab a runaway horse and save Edith Hawley from bein' killed, or hurt."

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Chub paused. Mr. McReady, with glowing eyes, leaned toward Matt.

"That was nobly done, my boy!" he cried.

Susie's eyes kindled.

"I knew you'd say that, dad," she said happily.

"You couldn't expect anythin' else of Motor Matt," chimed in Chub. "That's his style, every time an' all the time. He's all to the good!"

Matt was deeply touched. All the McReadys, notwithstanding the fact that his act in saving the girl had caused them to lose a chance at fortune which might never again come their way, approved heartily the course he had taken. The McReadys were generous and whole-souled; and, although they were in bitter need of a "strike," yet they were great-spirited enough to place humanity above the sordid question of mere money.

"Dad-binged if I kin feel like you do," croaked Welcome Perkins dismally. "It ain't likely, Jim, ye'll ever git another chanst at a 'strike,' an' I hate to think ye got juggled out o' this in any sich a way."

The prospector laughed.

"Why, old friend," said he, "it may be a good thing. I'd have to do development work, you know, then hunt around for capital to put up a mill, and I would be loading up with lots of care and worry. Now, however, I've made up my mind to get something to do right here in Phoenix, so I can be with you, and Susie, and Chub right along. I'm getting to be pretty old for knocking around the hills."

There was an undernote of wistfulness back of McReady's words that sent a pang to Motor Matt's heart. A moderate fortune would have enabled the prospector to pass his last days in comfort and give Chub and Susie a college education. Matt's conscience didn't reprove him for what he had done, but he couldn't help looking at the other side of the picture.

McReady pushed away from the table, put his arms around Susie and Chub, and started for the front room.

"Let's all go out on the porch," said he. "The sun is bright, the sky is fair, and it's easy to be happy if you only make up your mind to be thankful for all you've got. I'd rather be in my shoes, this minute, than in Jacks', or Hawley's."

"Or Perry's," added Chub. "I wonder what that fellow thinks of himself?"

"If that there Pedro Morales had had a leetle more sense," grumbled old Welcome, "he'd a-handed that letter over to Chub instid o' to Perry. Consarn them Mexicans, anyways. If ye told him where to go to find Chub, Jim, why didn't he go?"

"Probably he didn't understand the directions," answered McReady. "Forget it all, Welcome. Come out on the porch and we'll have a smoke. This way, Matt, you and Clip."

The day couldn't have been finer. In the vicinity of Phœnix they say they have three hundred and sixty cloudless days out of every year, and perpetual spring is in the air.

A slight breeze ruffled the branches of the cotton-woods, down by the canal, birds were twittering and singing, and the world seemed a pretty good place to live in, despite the fact that mining-claims were temporarily at a discount.

Hardly had the little party seated themselves on the porch when the chugging of an automobile came to their ears. A car was coming from the direction of town, and was at that moment crossing the bridge.

"Snakes alive!" chattered Welcome, staring. "I ain't got my glasses on, but 'pears to me like that's Dirk Hawley's ottermobill."

"That's what it is," answered Chub, breathing hard. "He's sailin' by in all kinds o' style, he and his daughter. There's a little more money added to the pile he's got in the bank, an' I hope he's satisfied."

"Tainted money, at that," growled Clip. "That last deal was the crookedest he ever worked. Where's Perry? He ought to be along."

Chub was mistaken. Dirk Hawley and his daughter were not going to "sail by." To the astonishment of all on the porch, the resplendent touring-car came to a halt in front of the McReady gate.

"They needn't call here," muttered Chub. "Come to rub it in, I suppose."

"Or to talk it over," said McReady.

"I'll go fish Lucretia Borgia out o' the cistern, that's what I'll do," flared Welcome. "Mebby I'll need 'er yet."

"Stay right where you are, old friend," cautioned McReady. "I'm ready to talk with Hawley, if that's what he's here for."

Dirk Hawley got out of the car and helped his daughter down; then the two of them came through the gate and walked toward the group on the porch.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOTOR MATT'S TRIUMPH.

Edith Hawley was a stunningly pretty girl. There was little of her father's looks about her, however, and it was quite clear that she got most of her character from her mother's side of the house. She was a little pale, but otherwise showed no bad effects of the ordeal through which she had passed earlier in the day.

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All those on the porch got up as the two callers drew near the steps—that is, all except Welcome Perkins. The old ex-buccaneer of the plains just sat where he was and glared.

"Excuse me for buttin' in here," said Hawley, "but my daughter's got a little business with King." He turned to the girl. "Fire away, Edie," he added.

"Which is Mr. King?" queried the girl, in a low voice.

Matt stepped away from the others and came down the steps.

"I saw you when you stopped the horse," Edith Hawley went on, fixing her hazel eyes on Matt's face, "but I couldn't remember much, then. I want to thank you. Father brought me here so that I could. I want you to understand how grateful I am."

She put out her hand timidly and Matt took it cordially.

"That's all right, Miss Hawley," said he, flushing. "What I did for you I would have done for anybody caught in the same way."

"I believe that," she returned significantly. "Even if you had known who I was it wouldn't have made any difference."

"Not a particle," answered Matt.

"Isn't there something my father can do for you?" she asked.

Matt shook his head.

"Well," she went on, "there's something I'm going to do for you." She turned. "Father——"

"Wait a minute, Edie," interrupted Hawley. "Let me tell all of you," and he faced those on the porch, "just how I stand in the matter of that minin'-claim. It won't take more'n a minute, and it may save a lot of hard feelin's. I've been grub-stakin' Jacks for two or three years, and he ain't

never yet found anythin' but country rock. I was gettin' tired o' puttin' up good money, an' the last time he started out I told him he'd got to find somethin' or we'd split up our partnership. I reckon that made him rather too keen for a strike, so that he didn't care much how he made it just so he delivered the goods.

"Well, when Dace Perry came to me t'other day an' says he's found a letter concernin' me an' Jacks, of course I read it; an', havin' grub-staked Jacks, quite naturally I took his side. I sent Bisbee out to help Jacks keep what was rightfully his an' mine, an' later I sent Perry out on a horse to find out what they were doin' an' report.

"Well, Perry comes in with a location notice, an' says he had to ride like Sam Hill to get ahead o' Matt King, who was hustling for town with a notice o' McReady's. That's all Perry told me. Never a word, mind ye, about scarin' Edie's horse an' makin' it run away, nary a word about what Matt King done to stop the horse—all he said was what I'm tellin' ye.

"By and by, Edie was brought home by a man I know, who had seen the runaway from start to finish. He told me the whole of it."

Dirk Hawley's coarse, heavy face was flushed. His voice shook a little as he went on.

"Edie's goin' to school in 'Frisco, an' she come out here to make her father a short visit. There ain't anythin' I wouldn't do for her, an' about the first thing I did after she struck town was to buy Ajax, that white riding-horse. She knows how to ride, Edie does—none better—but the way Perry scared the horse didn't leave Edie much of a chance. If King hadn't taken after Ajax, I—I——"

Hawley snapped his heavy lower jaw and remained silent for a moment.

"Well," he finished, "I gave Perry three hours to get out of town an' to go back to Denver where he belongs. He needs lookin' after, an' his father's the one to do it. I know King won't let me do anythin' for him, but I reckon he won't balk on takin' a little somethin' from Edie."

"I don't want any of your money, Mr. Hawley," began Matt, "if that's what——"

"Sure you don't," broke in the gambler grimly, "you don't want any o' my money an' you're not goin' to get any." He pulled a folded paper from his pocket. "I'd have done this sooner," he went on, "only I had to send my automobile out after Jacks. It was necessary for him to sign the paper along with me."

He gave the document to Edith, and she turned and placed the paper in Matt's hand.

"It's a quitclaim deed to that mine," she said, "and it's made out to James McReady. It's yours, Mr. King, because you won it. If you hadn't stopped to save me, you'd have got to the recorder's office first. It isn't much to do for the service you rendered me, but I'm sure you wouldn't let us do any more. Good-by!"

She held out her hand again. After Matt had clasped the small palm for the second time, she turned, took her father's arm, and they went back to the automobile.

In astonishment the group on the porch watched the car turn in the road and disappear in the direction of town.

"Waal, waal!" gulped Welcome Perkins. "Somebody please ter pinch me, so's I kin wake up. It must be a dream—can't be nothin' else. Dirk Hawley! Actin' like that!"

Welcome picked up his wooden pin and looked hard at the brass tip on the end of it.

Chub was also staggered.

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"Get next that he didn't say anything about that underhand work," he commented, "how he had the wireless instruments smashed, and all that."

"He's keeping such things from his daughter," said Susie. "Can you blame him for that?"

"Let him be straight, then," put in Clip. "If he wants the girl to think he's honest and respectable, let him act the part. It's the easiest way."

"It was the gal as done it," grinned Welcome. "Dirk Hawley never'd hev sashayed over here an' give up that quitclaim o' his own free will an' accord. Not him!"

"You don't know about that, Welcome," said Matt. "It isn't always wise to be so quick with your snap judgments."

"And Perry's gone," went on Clip, scowling. "Hawley ordered him out of town. He had to go. And I had no chance to settle our account. Some day we'll meet again. Those of my race do not forget easily. It will keep."

"Perry owes Hawley a heap of plunks, I've heard," put in Chub. "Probably Perry had to hike or face a whole lot of trouble."

Matt stepped over to the prospector and gave him the quitclaim deed.

"That 'strike' of yours has made you a good deal of trouble, Mr. McReady," said he, "but I don't think we have any of us got any kick coming on the way the business has turned out. I hope the claim will make a bonanza mine, and that the McReadys will have more money than they can spend."

"Hip, hip, hurroo!" wheezed Welcome. "Canned stuff—that's what the McReadys lives on fer all the rest o' their days."

"Canned stuff"—plenty of it—was Welcome's idea of luxury.

McReady, as he took the quitclaim deed, gripped Motor Matt's hand.

"Matt," said he, with feeling, "but for you, this would never have come about. It was a big day for the McReadys when Chub chummed up with you, my boy. You ought to share in this good luck; by every law of right and justice, you're entitled to an interest in the 'strike.'"

Matt shook his head.

"It's a family affair," said he, "and you couldn't make me take even a piece of quartz from the 'blow-out.'"

"That's Matt King for you," observed Tom Clipperton gruffly, edging around until he stood at Matt's side. "True to his friends. That's why he has made a hit with me."

Clipperton, on his own account, knew what it was to have Motor Matt for a friend.

"We're going to Denver," Clipperton went on. "If Chub don't buy Penny's motor-cycle, I'll buy it myself."

"I've got to hunt up that wheel," murmured Chub, who appeared to be a bit dazed. "Mebby I'll have to pay for the old terror without getting it. And there's Old Baldy, an' Perry's horse out at the Bluebell. Wish I could call up Delray by wireless and tell him all about this. Matt, you're the best pal in the world. Don't I wish I could go to Denver with you. But it's me to the woods—or school."

Chub jumped for Matt and grabbed his hand.

"An' I'm wonderin'," said old Welcome plaintively, stumping forward along the porch, "if ye'll let a pore ole reformed road-agent grip yer honest pa'm, Matt? I've shore made some mistakes, an' among 'em I thought ridin' that benzine go-devil o' Penny's was about the wust; but I've changed my mind. If it hadn't been fer me makin' Hawley drap on the bridge like I done, that there letter wouldn't never hev been picked up by Matt, an' Hawley an' Perry would hev had things their own way. Shucks! I'm in on this rejoicin' some myself. Ain't I now, honest Injun?"

"You are, Welcome," declared Matt heartily; "if you hadn't been so bull-headed, and had found out how to stop the motor-cycle as well as to start it, that letter wouldn't have been picked up."

"Bull-headed!" demurred Welcome. "H'm! You hand out a word now an' ag'in, that kinder jars. Anyhow, I'm proposin' three cheers fer Motor Matt. Next ter the ole ex-pirate, he done more'n anybody else to save the claim. Let 'er go, now. Jine in hearty, all you McReadys! Hip, hip——"

They made a good deal of noise for a small crowd, and it's safe to say that Motor Matt was the happiest one in the lot.

THE END.

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AMONG THE ALLIGATORS.

A low, heavy mutter of thunder came booming through the hot, still air, and Fred Kinnersly looked up sharply from the potatoes he was peeling for his solitary supper. "Another storm!" he growled. "Two already to-day, and now a third. This is beyond a joke."

He dropped his knife, and walked outside, onto the veranda of the little two-roomed shack.

A huge blue-black cloud with hard, shell-like edges was rising over the pines in the northwest, and once again the air quivered and a spark of electric fire lit the heart of the great mountain of whirling vapor.

"Worst rains I've ever known," muttered Fred, "and this is my fifth summer down south. We'll have the mine flooded if this goes on, and all those niggers out of work." He paused; then: "Poor old Sam," he smiled. "What an awful ducking he'll get coming home! Well, thank goodness tomorrow's Saturday. This steamy heat is the very deuce to work in, and I'll be glad of the lay-off on Sunday."

He was turning to go back into the house, when the thud of hoofs far up the track made him pause, and presently a pony shot into sight among the red pine trunks in the distance. Its rider, bending low in the saddle, was sending the plucky little beast along at a furious gallop.

"Why, it's Jack Godfrey!" exclaimed Fred, in surprise. "Why on earth is he in such a deuce of a hurry?"

The pony came tearing down the sandy track, sending spurts of wet sand and water flashing behind it. Next moment Jack Godfrey pulled up at the door and flung himself off the panting, sweating beast.

"What's up?" cried Fred Kinnersly. "You seem in a hurry."

"Is Sam French back yet?" gasped the other.

"No, of course not. He only left the mine after dinner. He generally gets back about ten. Why, what's the matter?" as he saw Godfrey's face go white under the tan.

"Ducane broke jail last night," said Godfrey hoarsely.

Kinnersly staggered. "Good heavens!" he muttered. "How?"

"Set fire to the place. He and his whole gang are out—five of them. They're armed, too. Word came to Orange Port two hours ago that they'd raided Lopez's place early this morning, and left in the direction of the Big Cypress."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"On the wrong track. He thought they'd make for the sea, and he and his posse went toward Wehila. Anderson, the deputy, has got three men, and is on his way round the north end of the Big Cypress. He told me to warn you, and to say that as the water's so high it'll probably be midnight before he reaches Black Bayou."

Kinnersly was whiter than the other. The whole position was clear to him.

In a few words it stood thus: He, Kinnersly, was sub-manager of the Big Lone Pine Phosphate Mine, which lay about a mile from the edge of the swamp known as the Big Cypress. This swamp was twenty-five miles long, but not more than two to three wide.

On the other side of the swamp was Lakeville, the county town. It was distant from the mine seven miles, as the crow flies, and more than twenty by road.

Every Friday afternoon Sam French, the manager of the mine, went to Lakeville in his buggy, accompanied by one negro, to fetch the pay-money for the seventy hands employed in quarrying the phosphate. Sam was well known and popular.

But now—well, there was no one in South Florida who had not heard of the atrocities of Jean Ducane. The man was a mulatto, half French, half negro, who had come to Florida from New Orleans. He had once been employed in the Lone Pine Mine. Trouble began with his getting drunk and insulting Sam, who had promptly knocked him down, and next morning fired him.

Then Ducane had disappeared. A week later Sam French was shot at from the scrub. The mine-hands, who were fond of their manager, made the place too hot to hold the would-be murderer, and the next heard of Ducane was down at Key West.

Escaping from Key West, the mulatto worked his way up the coast to Tampa, where he burgled a bank. But even then he was not caught, and the climax came when he returned to the neighborhood of Lakeville and deliberately fired two houses in the suburbs, causing the death of

a woman and two children. The whole neighborhood rose in arms. Ducane was caught, and four negroes with him, and jailed with difficulty by the sheriff in the face of a mob yelling to lynch him.

And now this human wild beast was at large again, and both the young fellows knew that the first thing he would do would be to hold up the manager of the Lone Pine Mine and rob and murder him.

"You see, it's not only revenge," said Kinnersly. "The money would mean everything to him and his gang. All in silver, too!"

"And Sam knows nothing!" cried Godfrey. He pulled out his watch. "What time'll he be passing Black Bayou?"

"About eight, I should think."

"And it's nearly seven now," muttered Godfrey despairingly. "No horse could do it in the time."

"You're sure it will be at Black Bayou?"

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"Not a doubt of it. The place is made for a hold-up. Track narrow, thick bay scrub both sides, and there'll be water over the road there, so Sam'll have to walk his horse. It's a death-trap, Fred."

Fred Kinnersly set his teeth. "I'm going to warn him," he said quietly.

Godfrey started. "My dear chap, it's fourteen miles by road. Have you a horse here that can do fourteen miles in an hour over Florida sand and in this storm? Besides, you'd have to come through Black Bayou yourself, and get shot for your pains, to a dead certainty."

"There's another way," said Fred.

"Another way!"

"Across the swamp!"

Godfrey laughed harshly. "You're crazy, Fred."

"Did you ever hear of the Spanish Causeway?" asked Kinnersly quietly.

"That! In this weather! Man, it's under water! All of it. And rotten and broken. You couldn't do it in the dry season and in broad daylight. Listen!"

Again the cloud spat blue fire, and the thunder bellowed angrily over the fast darkening forest.

Kinnersly's jaw hardened. "I'm going to try it. Anything's better than that Sam should be shot down and murdered."

"I tell you it's sheer lunacy. It'll be black dark in half an hour. I wouldn't try it for ten thousand."

"You'll try it for Sam's life," said Kinnersly quietly.

Godfrey stared hard at the other. "You mean to go?"

"I do."

"All right. I'm your man."

In less than five minutes the two, heavily armed, were tramping rapidly along a narrow path which led down a long, gradual slope toward the swamp. By this time clouds had covered the sky and cut off the light of the setting sun. Faster and faster the lightning-flashes shot through the gloom, while the thunder crashed louder and louder till the very ground trembled beneath the reverberations.

Then came the rain in sheets, as if a cataract was falling on the forest. In a few moments the path was swimming. The men were ankle-deep in water, which foamed under the lash of the falling torrents.

They stumbled over twisted roots; long, pliant branches switched their faces; thorny creepers caught and tore their clothes and skin, while now and then the ominous folds of a water-moccasin could be seen in the tangled growth on either side the path.

But the two young men never faltered. Kinnersly leading, they pressed on in single file. The path grew narrower. Here and there Kinnersly was forced to slash the tough creeper with his knife before he could force a passage.

They were on the level now, and the water was nearly knee-deep. To Godfrey, who had never before traveled this path, it was a marvel how Kinnersly found his way.

Gigantic cypresses rose on either side, shutting off the last remnants of light with their monstrous heads of matted foliage; long trails of melancholy Spanish moss brushed their faces, and the air was thick with the pungent scent of palmetto bloom.

Slowly the storm died, passing away into the south, and as the rain ceased the mosquitoes rose in stinging, humming swarms, and the noises of the night swamp burst forth. Bullfrogs bellowed, tree-frogs bleated like lost lambs, crickets shrilled, and owls hooted.

Suddenly Kinnersly sank almost to his waist, but struggled up again immediately. "Look out, Jack. A hole in the causeway," he said quietly.

Godfrey felt the sucking mud beneath the water, and repressed a shiver. At every step the water seemed to deepen. "Shall we do it, Fred?" he muttered.

"It's more open farther on," replied the other. "If the water's not too deep we'll be all right. If it

is, we must do a bit of swimming—that's all."

Again they plunged on through the hot darkness. Water and air alike were stagnant. The close steam of the swamp was suffocating, and the darkness was so intense that Godfrey had to follow rather by sound than by sight.

All of a sudden the bushes broke away. They were in the open once more. At that very moment the cloud broke, and the moon shone out clear. The white light fell upon a sheet of water, a wide lagoon, which lay smooth as oil, bounded on every side by a black wall of swamp vegetation.

"This seems to be where we swim, Fred," said Godfrey quietly.

"No," replied Fred. "The causeway crosses, but it's out of sight below the water. Come on."

"Anything's better than those horrible bushes and creepers," said Godfrey. He looked at his watch. "Fred, it's twenty to eight."

"We shall do it," was the confident reply. "It's easier going the far side." As he spoke, Kinnersly stepped out from the shore, and, feeling his way cautiously, walked steadily out across the lake.

Here and there were ugly gaps, but, in the main, the ancient masonry built for some unknown purpose by long-forgotten Spaniards was sound. Their spirits rose as they pressed on rapidly under the welcome light of the full moon.

They were a couple of hundred yards from shore when, all of a sudden, a black object, for all the world like a floating log, rose noiselessly from the depths close on Kinnersly's right.

He stopped sharply, and Godfrey saw him draw his revolver from the holster at his waist.

Godfrey needed no telling. He knew the nature of the new peril which confronted them. An alligator!

Slowly, very slowly, the alligator rose till not only its great gnarled head, but the whole of its long ridged back, was above the water.

"What a brute!" muttered Godfrey, instinctively drawing his big hunting-knife. "Get on, Fred. The alligator's coming closer."

"There's an ugly place just here," replied the other, and Godfrey saw his friend sink nearly to his shoulders, recover himself with an effort, and scramble up the far side. "Wait; I'll help you, Jack," he said, turning.

He pulled his friend across the gap, and then as they both stood up on the far side, in water hardly more than ankle-deep, a simultaneous gasp of horror burst from them both.

Three more alligators had appeared, and, even as they watched, more and more of the hideous monsters rose in ominous silence above the quiet water and came gliding slowly onward toward the causeway.

Their cruel, unwinking eyes shone like green fire in the moon-rays, and the breathless air was full of a sickening odor of musk. There were dozens of them; from huge, rugged veterans of ten or twelve feet and weighing perhaps half a ton, down to fierce, active, hungry six-footers.

For a moment the two young fellows stood hesitating, staring breathlessly at the nightmare spectacle before them. Then Kinnersly desperately cried: "Come on, Jack!"

"Shoot. Why don't you shoot?" exclaimed Godfrey.

"Not till I have to," replied Kinnersly. "Ducane may hear and suspect. If he does, he'll move farther up, and attack Sam before we can reach him."

"But the brutes are closing in."

"Never mind. Come on. Keep close to me, and splash as much as you can."

Kinnersly walked forward. Even in the moonlight he could not see the causeway so much as a step ahead. The thick brown swamp water hid it completely. And both he and Godfrey knew that one false step meant a death almost too horrible for words. An alligator fears a man upright on dry land, but in its native element it fears nothing, and will pull down a dog, a horse, a man, or a bull.

Closer and closer the dreadful brutes closed in till their yard-long jaws actually rested upon the crumbling edges of the sunken causeway.

Now and then one would open his vast jaws and blow the air through his nostrils with a noise like a giant snoring. Then the great yellow tusks would clash together with a sharp, ringing sound horribly suggestive of a steel trap closing.

Kinnersly, who was leading, found the water growing deeper.

"Is there a hole there?" cried Godfrey anxiously.

"Afraid there is, old man," replied Kinnersly, feeling cautiously with one foot. "We ought to have brought sticks."

"The 'gators are closing up behind," said Godfrey desperately. "We must shove ahead at any price."

"Right; I have found bottom. Come on." Kinnersly dropped onto his knees. Immediately the whole horde of alligators began moving up. Godfrey, following close behind his friend and splashing vigorously, could not repress a shiver of horror. "Quick!" he hissed; "quick, or they'll have us."

At that very moment the surface of the water broke in front of Kinnersly, and out of the depths heaved itself up a nightmare apparition. An alligator, bigger than any they had seen yet—a gnarled and rugged monster of huge length and enormous girth.

Getting its short, thick forelegs onto the stonework, it hoisted itself up, completely barring the way. Its cavernous mouth gaped open, showing rows of huge, twisted tusks, which could have bitten a bull in two.

Its fetid breath blew full in Kinnersly's face, nearly sickening him with the horrible, putrefying stench.

"Shoot him!" shouted Godfrey. "The others are coming."

There was no help for it. Kinnersly thrust the muzzle of his pistol almost between the yawning rows of teeth and pulled the trigger.

With the report the monstrous brute flung itself high into the air, and fell over sideways with a crash that sent a wave almost over their heads. Next instant the placid water of the bayou was beaten into showers of spray, which gleamed silver in the brilliant moonlight.

Waves dashed over the causeway. The two men stood still, appalled at the fearful death-struggles of the monster.

"Thank goodness, you got him that time!" exclaimed Godfrey, struggling up out of the water onto firmer ground.

Another moment and all was clear. The great alligator had vanished, and with him the others, frightened at the commotion, had gone, too.

"Now's our chance!" cried Kinnersly, and pushed on with reckless speed.

Fortunately, the rest of the causeway was unbroken, and they reached the far side of the lagoon in safety.

"They're coming up again," muttered Godfrey, glancing back.

"Never mind. They can't hurt us now," cried the other.

They were in the brush again, plunging in the mud under the thick shadows of the cypress. Neither spoke. It was very near eight, and each moment they expected to hear shots. Both dreaded they might be too late.

On they rushed, now waist-deep in a morass of mud and rotting vegetation, now struggling through a tangle of wild grape and bamboo vine.

At last, after what seemed an endless time, the footing grew firmer and the ground began to rise. The cypress and palmetto gave place to pine and wire grass.

"We're close to the road," muttered Kinnersly breathlessly. "And I only hope Sam hasn't passed."

"Listen!" hissed the other, pulling up short. "Yes, I hear horses' feet."

Once more they both rushed forward. The hoof-sounds grew plainer, and the red glow of a cigar shone through the pine trunks.

Kinnersly flung himself recklessly into the open. "Sam, is that you?" he hissed desperately.

There was a sharp exclamation. "Who's that?"

"I—Kinnersly. Stop!"

The buggy came to a standstill, and Kinnersly panted out his explanation.

"You came through the swamp!" exclaimed French, as if he could not believe his ears.

"Yes, but don't you understand? Ducane's loose."

"Oh, that's all right," said the other coolly. "He'll be down in Black Bayou, half a mile away. What fazes me is how you chaps came along the causeway. It was mighty white of you, and I'm real grateful. Jump in, an' let's git along an' interview this here Ducane."

For the life of him Kinnersly could not help laughing. "Sam, don't be a fool! There are probably five of them, and you bet they'll be lying up in the timber. The first you know will be they've shot you."

"I reckon not," returned French, as coolly as before. "It's going to cost me a horse, but that's a sight cheaper'n a thousand dollars in United States currency. Get right in, boys. I've got it all planned inside here," touching the top of his head.

With a shrug of his broad shoulders, Kinnersly obeyed, and Godfrey followed.

"Get your shooting-irons ready," said Sam, in a low voice, at the same time throwing away his cigar. "Now, don't say a word, any of you, or make any noise."

He drove on till the ground dipped again and the narrow road descended toward the gloomy shadow of a thicket of bays. Then he pulled up, got out, and motioned to the others to do the same.

He took out the bags of coin, propped a cushion on the seat with a coat over it, tied the reins to the splash-board, and clucked to the horse to go on.

Kinnersly chuckled silently. "I see now," he whispered.

"Glad o' that," remarked Sam. "Now we'll keep along in the bushes a bit behind the wagon. You come along with me, Kinnersly, an', Godfrey, you take the nigger. I don't need to tell you to shoot straight when the chance comes."

The horse went splashing slowly through the water, here about a foot deep. The four men stole noiselessly along through the bushes on either side.

They had gone perhaps a hundred yards, and reached the bottom of the hollow, where the water was axle-deep, when suddenly a rifle crashed, and a spit of fire flashed from the bushes to the right.

"Got him," came a shout, and men came plunging out of the scrub and surrounded the wagon.

"Now, lads!" came a crisp command from French, and at the word four weapons spoke simultaneously.

Three of the robbers dropped in their tracks. The other two stood dumfounded, unable to imagine whence the sudden attack had come.

Then one of them—Ducane himself—gave a yell of defiance, and came charging furiously toward French's party, firing as he ran.

A bullet whipped Kinnersly's hat from his head. Then a second volley rang out, and Ducane flung up his hands, and, without a sound, fell over on his back. The fifth man ran for his life.

French walked up to the spot where Ducane's body floated.

A patch of white moonlight fell full on the twisted yellow face, and showed a red hole in the very center of the forehead.

"Saved the hangman a job," he said quietly. "Now I reckon we'll walk back to Lakeville, if these other wounded rascals can do the trick. We'll go to the hotel, and the supper's on me to-night, boys."

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521—Dick Merriwell's Disguise.

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Transcriber's Note:

A table of contents was added.

Inconsistent representation of the oe ligature in Phœnix has been normalized.

Page 4, changed "MacReady" to "McReady."

Page 5, changed double to single quotes around "blow-out."

Page 6, changed ? to ! in "Howdy, Clip!"

Page 11, changed "topppled" to "toppled."

Page 19, changed "Mat flung" to "Matt flung."

Page 24, changed ? to ! in "Howdy, Matt!"

Page 27, changed "Edth" to "Edith."

Page 28, added missing em-dash to "NEXT NUMBER" summary.

Page 29, removed unnecessary quote before "Kinnerly staggered."

Page 30, changed incorrect character name from Godfrey to Kinnerly in "'Not till I have to,' replied Kinnerly."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTOR MATT'S DARING; OR, TRUE TO HIS FRIENDS ***

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